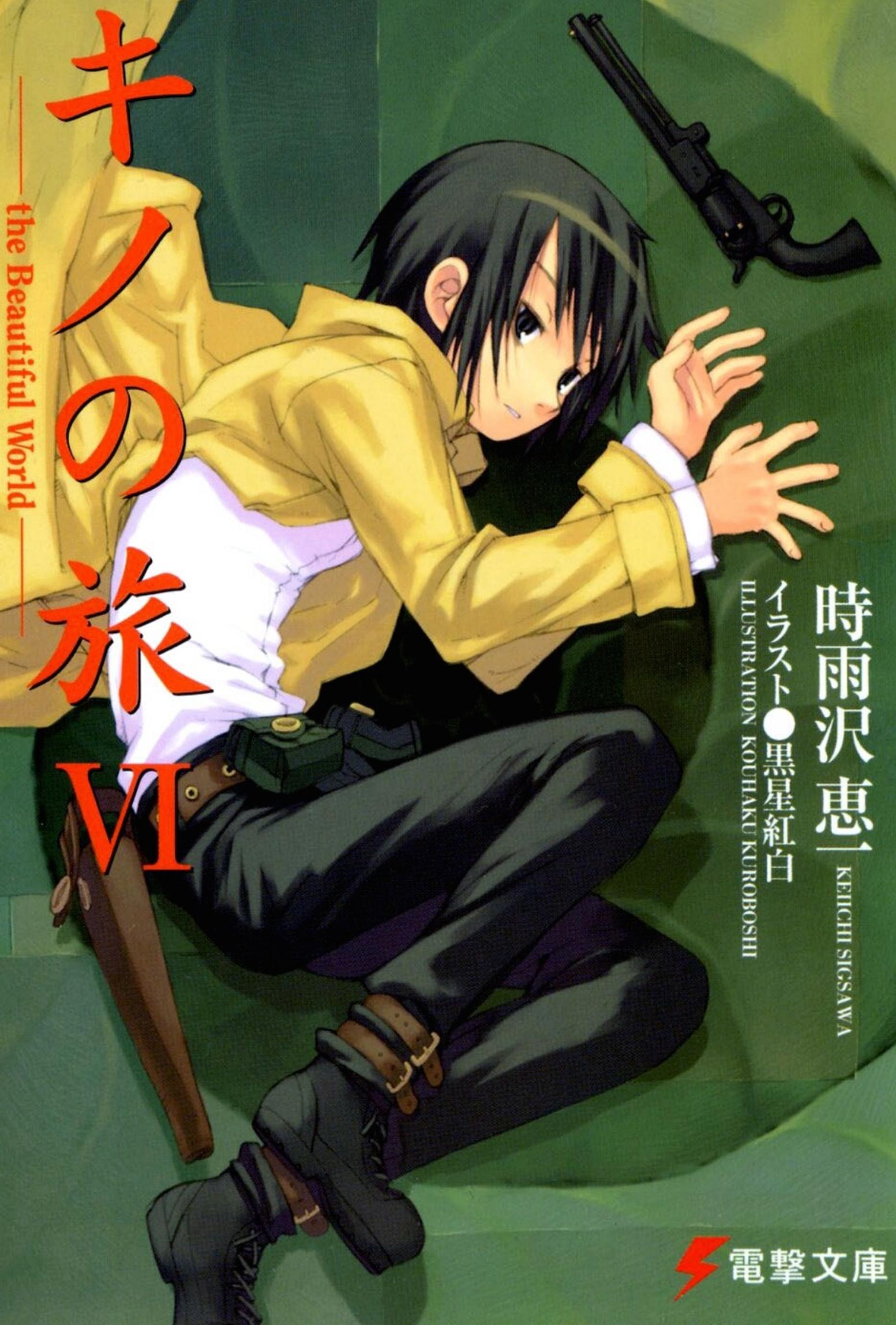


——the Beautiful World——

キノの旅 VI



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電撃文庫

Kino no Tabi
-the Beautiful World-
vol. VI

by Keiichi Sigsawa

[Novel Updates](#)

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Frontispiece: The Countries that Bar Entry - Reasonable-

One spring day, a traveler knocked on the gates.

The traveler was young, wearing a brown coat and a black jacket underneath, along with a hat, goggles, and a holstered hand persuader.

The traveler was riding a motorrad.

“May I enter?” asked the traveler.

The gatekeeper scowled. “You may not! We do not permit entry to people like you. Please leave immediately!”

The traveler asked him why.

The gatekeeper replied, “Because you’re carrying a persuader! A traveler with a persuader once came to our country and wreaked havoc inside. It was the worst incident in our history. Since then, we have been turning away anyone who was armed with a persuader. You have your reason now; please turn back.”

“Couldn’t I just leave my persuader at the guardhouse here?” the traveler asked.

The gatekeeper was livid. “Certainly not! Anyone who carries a persuader is as good as insane. We couldn’t let you in even if you threw yours out!”

Disappointed, the traveler gave up and left on the motorrad.

One summer day, a traveler knocked on the gates.

The traveler was young, wearing a brown coat and a black jacket underneath, along with a hat, goggles, and a holstered hand persuader.

The traveler was riding a motorrad.

“May I enter?” asked the traveler.

The gatekeeper scowled. “You may not! We do not permit entry to people

like you. Please leave immediately!"

The traveler asked him why.

The gatekeeper replied, "Because you're on a motorrad! A traveler on a motorrad once came to our country and wreaked havoc inside. It was the worst incident in our history. Since then, we have been turning away anyone who rode on a motorrad. You have your reason now; please turn back."

"Couldn't I just leave keep the motorrad's engine turned off?" the traveler asked.

The gatekeeper was livid. "Certainly not! Anyone who rides a motorrad is as good as insane. We couldn't let you in even if you threw yours out!"

Disappointed, the traveler gave up and left on the motorrad.

One autumn day, a traveler knocked on the gates.

The traveler was young, wearing a brown coat and a black jacket underneath, along with a hat, goggles, and a holstered hand persuader.

The traveler was riding a motorrad.

"May I enter?" asked the traveler.

The gatekeeper scowled. "You may not! We do not permit entry to people like you. Please leave immediately!"

The traveler asked him why.

The gatekeeper replied, "Because you're wearing a black jacket! A traveler in a black jacket once came to our country and wreaked havoc inside. It was the worst incident in our history. Since then, we have been turning away anyone wearing a black jacket. You have your reason now; please turn back."

"Couldn't I just take off the jacket?" the traveler asked.

The gatekeeper was livid. "Certainly not! Anyone who wears a black jacket is as good as insane. We couldn't let you in even if you threw yours out!"

Disappointed, the traveler gave up and left on the motorrad.

One winter day, a traveler knocked on the gates.

The traveler was young, wearing a brown coat and a black jacket underneath, along with a hat, goggles, and a holstered hand persuader.

The traveler was riding a motorrad.

"May I enter?" asked the traveler.

The gatekeeper scowled. "You may not! We do not permit entry to people like you. Please leave immediately!"

The traveler asked him why.

The gatekeeper replied, "Because you're carrying a persuader, riding a motorrad, and wearing a black jacket! A traveler with a persuader wearing a black jacket once came to our country by motorrad and wreaked havoc inside. It was the worst incident in our history. Since then, we have been turning away anyone who was armed with a persuader, wearing a black jacket, and riding a motorrad. You have your reason now; please turn back."

"Couldn't I just leave my persuader at the guardhouse, turn off the motorrad's engine, and take off my jacket?" the traveler asked.

The gatekeeper was livid. "Certainly not! Anyone who carries a persuader, rides a motorrad, and wears a black jacket is as good as insane. We couldn't let you in even if you threw them out!"

"That's unfortunate. I have furs from all sorts of unusual animals from the forest with me, but it looks like I won't be doing business here."

Disappointed, the traveler gave up and turned.

But the gatekeeper stopped the traveler.

"Now that I think about it, a persuader is vital for traveling through the dangerous outlands, and a motorrad is a convenient way to get around. And black jackets are elegant, to boot. It suits you. I think it would be a real shame to turn away a traveler in the winter. Please come inside."

"Really? Then by all means."

The traveler entered the country.

Frontispiece: The Neutral Stories -All Alone-

Once upon a time, a traveler lay dead on the roadside. His bags were stuffed with valuables.

A pair of travelers happened to be passing by. They each insisted on taking all of the dead man's valuables and refused to give an inch.

That was when another traveler happened to pass by. He asked the pair what they were arguing about.

The pair explained the situation and asked him, "Who are you going to side with?"

"Neither. I choose to be neutral," said the traveler.

"Really?" "Really?"

The pair shot him and happily split two people's worth of valuables amongst themselves.

Once upon a time, a traveler lay dead on the roadside. His bags were stuffed with valuables.

A pair of travelers happened to be passing by. They each insisted on taking all of the dead man's valuables and refused to give an inch.

That was when Shizu happened to pass by. He asked the pair what they were arguing about.

The pair explained the situation and asked him, "Who are you going to side with?"

"Neither. I choose to be neutral," said Shizu.

"Really?" "Really?"

The pair tried to shoot him. Shizu deflected the bullets with his sword.

"Please get along and divide the valuables amongst yourselves. Or I will cut you both down," Shizu told the pair as they stood in shock.

Once upon a time, a traveler lay dead on the roadside. His bags were stuffed with valuables.

A pair of travelers happened to be passing by. They each insisted on taking all of the dead man's valuables and refused to give an inch.

That was when Kino happened to pass by on Hermes. She asked the pair what they were arguing about.

The pair explained the situation and asked her, "Who are you going to side with?"

"I'm afraid I'm not interested. It's up to you," Kino said, and departed on Hermes before they could respond.

Once upon a time, a traveler lay dead on the roadside. His bags were stuffed with valuables.

A pair of travelers happened to be passing by. They each insisted on taking all of the dead man's valuables and refused to give an inch.

That was when Master and a slightly short but handsome man happened to pass by. She asked the pair what they were arguing about.

The pair explained the situation and asked her, "Who are you going to side with?"

"Me," Master said, as she and her partner held up the pair at gunpoint.



Frontispiece: The Story of a Tank -Life Goes On-

Once upon a time, there was a traveler named Kino.

Kino was a human, very young but a master with a persuader.

Kino's traveling partner was Hermes the motorrad. His luggage rack was stacked with travel gear. Because Kino was a traveler, they were visiting all sorts of countries.

One afternoon, Kino and Hermes were resting in the woods.

The forest was dark. Barely any sunlight filtered in between the leaves. That was when they heard a tremendous noise, the sound of trees collapsing. Birds fluttered loudly into the air.

"What was that?" Kino wondered out loud, rising from a fallen tree.

"It's a tank, Kino," Hermes said from the narrow road.

The sound of snapping bark grew louder and louder, and the ground began to rumble.

Eventually, a floating tank emerged from the woods, leaving a path as wide as its frame. With a thud, the tank felled one last tree and came to a stop.

The tank floated at about Kino's shoulder-level. Its body, armor, and rotating turret were covered in broken twigs and leaves.

"Hello, Motorrad. Hello, Rider," said the tank.

"Hello, Tank. How's your lifter doing?" asked Hermes.

"Hm. Not too bad. I almost never have to fly very high anymore," the tank replied. "What are you doing?"

"Traveling. And you?" asked Kino, looking up at the massive tank.

"Excellent question," the tank said, "I'm looking for a tank."

"A tank?"

"What're you gonna do when you find it?" asked Hermes.

"Shoot it down, of course."

Kino glanced down at Hermes. "You mean with your cannon?"

"That's right. The strongest weapon in my arsenal. A 200mm smoothbore cannon," the tank replied, moving the barrel to show Kino and Hermes. The cannon was in the shape of a long cylinder with a slightly thick section in the middle. Thin white lines were painted on it from front to back, like the pattern of a zebra.

"Why?"

"Because I was ordered to."

"Ordered?"

"That's right," the tank replied, moving the turret up and down.

"By who?" asked Hermes.

"The captain. The human who used to ride inside."

"Used to? Where is he now?"

"He used to sit inside and give me orders or look after me. We fought together through many battles and defeated countless enemies. Look at the kill count on my barrel. We destroyed a lot more, but there wasn't room there to paint any more. Isn't it amazing? But the captain fell in battle half a year ago. The hatch was ajar, and a bullet flew inside. It ricocheted all over, and he died in agony. He's all decayed now. All that's left are his clothes, helmet, and bones. Would you like to see?"

"No thank you," Kino said politely. "What about his orders?"

"When he died, the captain gave orders to destroy a tank. It was a black unit with three vertical red lines on the right side of its turret, and a tapir painted on the side. He said the tank had to be destroyed at any cost, so now I'm looking for it. My sensors can find enemies day and night, rain or shine or fog, but it just hasn't picked up on this one. Traveler, have you by any chance seen this tank on your travels?"

"No," Kino replied with a shake of the head.

"I see. But that's fine. I'm going to keep searching. I'll find it, no matter what. Because that is my mission. My duty."

The tank seemed to be talking to itself as much as it was to Kino and Hermes.

"I understand. Please go ahead. Hermes and I will rest here a little longer," said Kino.

"Really? Then I'll be going now. Still lots of places to look in. Goodbye, Motorrad. Goodbye, Traveler."

The tank went on its way again, floating through the forest and felling the trees in its path. It went on and on without turning even the slightest to the side.



Kino watched the floating tank depart.

"That's it, right?" Hermes asked.

"Yeah. But..."

Kino gazed at the tank in the distance. It was black with three vertical red lines on the right side of its turret, and a tapir painted on the side. Kino's eyes did not leave the tank until it had disappeared into the woods.

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キノの旅 VI

the Beautiful World



I vow that I cannot vow.

I can vow that I shall not vow.

I can vow that I cannot vow.

-I don't trust me-



Prologue: A Vow • B -A Kitchen Knife • B-

And...and...

I don't know what to write anymore.

I think I'm tearing up again.

I can't get it out of my mind. The basket and the darling thing inside. I'm choking up.

I'm so happy.

I've never been so happy in my entire life.

This day will stay with me forever. I will never forget what happened today.

What else is there to say?

What more could I add?

Is there anything more I should write?

That today was a wonderful day. I've written that over and over again already. But have I written that no matter how many times I repeat it, it will never be enough?

This is what it means to love. This is adoration for the most precious treasure in my life. I will protect this treasure with all I have, forever and always.

It's too much. If only it weren't the middle of the night, I'd break out dancing and shouting for the whole country to hear.

I will never, ever forget how wonderful today was.

I am the luckiest man in the world.

And today is the greatest day of my life.

No, from today on, every day of my life will be great. Always.

I don't think I'm making sense anymore. It's too hard to go on without rambling. I should stop writing for today.



Chapter 1: Her Journey -Chances-

Nestled in a deep green wood, near a clear lake reflecting the bright blue sky, was a large country. It was filled with tall buildings and crisscrossed by a web of roads and alleys.

There was a set of gates at the western wall, with a guardhouse used for immigrations procedures.

A motorrad stood in the plaza, a short distance from the guardhouse. Its rear seat was laden with travel gear.

The rider was wearing a black jacket, a belt, and a holstered hand persuader on her thigh. She was in her mid-teens with short black hair, large eyes, and fair features. Over her head she wore a hat and a pair of goggles.

The plaza was empty, save for a few birds flying around in search of food. The sun hung across the top of the eastern wall, casting the rider's shadow through the gate.

"How much longer, Kino?"

"You just asked me a little while ago, Hermes," replied the rider.

Then there was a noise, and a cleaning truck broke the silence of the streets. It sent birds flying off as it hosed down the thoroughfare by the plaza and disappeared.

Kino's shadow grew a little shorter.

"Not yet?" Hermes asked again.

"Not yet," Kino replied. That was when the guardhouse door opened.

"Is it our turn yet?" Hermes asked. A man stepped outside.

He was in his mid-thirties, dressed for outdoor activities and wearing a vest with many pockets that could store a variety of things at once. Slung behind his back was a rifle-type persuader. It was military-grade with a plastic frame, the scope equipped with built-in night vision and a laser sight.

When the man spotted Kino and Hermes, he stepped forward and greeted them. Kino got off Hermes and greeted him back.

"Are you in line? I'm sorry, but there's one more person inside. It's going to take a while—the paperwork is nothing to sneeze at," said the man.

Hermes asked, "Are you from here? Going on a journey?"

"Well, yes," the man replied, downcast.

"So where's your goodbye party?" Hermes asked without an ounce of tact.
"Your family and friends aren't the nicest people, are they?"

"You don't pull any punches, do you?" the man sighed, and looked back at the guardhouse. The door was still closed.

"I suppose you must have your reasons," Kino said.

The man nodded. "Yeah. It's supposed to be a secret, but I guess there's no harm in telling outlanders. I don't think I'd mind too much if someone out there knew. ...We have a long wait ahead of us, so would you mind listening to my story? Just to pass the time? I'll tell you why I'm leaving the country," he said, looking Kino in the eye.

Kino pushed her hat up slightly. "Please do."

The man's expression darkened, but he soon smiled. "See, it's because I'm going to repent. For the rest of my life."

"Repent?" "For what?" asked Kino and Hermes.

Something like a grin and a grimace rose to the man's lips. "I know, I know. It sounds weird. But I need to do this... I have to do this..."

Several seconds passed in silence. "Is that all?" Hermes piped up.

"N-no, not yet. I was just trying to figure out where to begin. All right, so the person in the guardhouse back there right now is a woman. We're going to leave together."

"Your friend?"

"I don't know if you could call her that. But she's the one who suggested we should go. She wants me to protect her on the road if things get dangerous."

And that's because..." the man paused. "...Because I killed her boyfriend."

"What?"

"It was seven years ago. We were total strangers then. I made a terrible mistake—drank and drive even though I knew it was illegal. I couldn't think, I couldn't tell what was going on around me, and I sped up so much that I missed my turn at the intersection. That's when it happened..."

"What happened?"

"I...drove into a house. But that wasn't all. A pedestrian got pinned between my car and the house...and I ended up killing that innocent man." He looked up at the blinding sun with a quiet sigh. "I was arrested and tried. His girlfriend was there, cursing me. Calling me a murderer and demanding that I bring back her boyfriend. And it's understandable. I deserved it all. That was how we first met."

The man's shoulders sagged.

"This is kind of a healthy story for passing the time," said Hermes.

"You mean, 'heavy'?"

"Yeah, that," Hermes replied, and went quiet.

Kino said, "And then what happened?"

"I was sentenced to ten years in prison and went to a facility for traffic offenders. I lost my job, my life, everything. But I was single and didn't have parents anymore, so not a lot of people cared."

"Those numbers don't match up. Did you break out?" Hermes asked, curious.

The man chuckled and shook his head. "That's not the end of the story. After I went to prison, I regretted what I did. From the bottom of my heart. So I wrote to her. I apologized desperately. I told her that I would do whatever it took to repent, that I would devote my life to paying her back."

"And?"

"She didn't reply. I wrote to her once a month on the dot. I wanted her to know that I was sincerely regretting my actions. I even sent her the meager pay

I got at the prison.”

The man looked back again. The guardhouse door was still closed, now lit by the sun.

“Six years passed, and I was completely used to prison life. I forgot what it was like to be free, living like everyone else. That was when she came to visit me. I was floored. It was the biggest shock of my life. I saw her across the window, and the huge bundles of open letters she brought...and I broke down crying, apologizing. Just knowing that she read my letters made me happy. But guess what? Things got even better. She told me to raise my head.”

“And she asked you to leave the country with her,” Kino said.

“Yeah. She wanted to leave. Said she had too many painful memories of this place... That she wanted to go settle somewhere else. And she asked me to be her bodyguard on the way. As it turns out, prisoners with less than five years of their sentence left are allowed to leave the country, on the condition that they never return. It’s a loophole from the days when exile was commonplace. I was so surprised that I asked her, ‘Don’t you hate me?’”

“And?” “And what did she say?”

“She said, ‘Yes. I still despise you. But you promised me in your letters that you’d devote your life to paying me back. So I’m asking you.’”

“Then what happened?”

“I thought it over. Thought harder than I ever did in my entire life. I mean, I just had to spend four more years in there and I’d be a free man. And I’d never considered leaving my home forever. I was born and raised here. I wanted to live and die here, and be buried alongside my parents. I wanted to get released, work hard, and start a new life. But...”

“But?”

“It occurred to me that maybe she was right. Maybe that was a way of repenting, of paying for my crimes. And it would make her happy, too. I considered it for a year and decided to accept. I’ll be exiled for life and I have no idea how long I’ll have to be her bodyguard, but I’m going to do it. I told her in person when she came to visit. She just smiled and said, ‘Thank you,’ and it all

felt so...I don't know. It's hard to explain."

His hands shot up to his eyes, covering them. The man excused himself and turned his back to Kino.

"I guess this'll be the last time I cry in my homeland," he said quietly.

The guardhouse door remained closed. Some time later, the man looked up at the sky again.

Then he turned.

"She hasn't forgiven me yet," he said, "So I'm going to devote the rest of my life to paying for my crimes. I don't know how long she'll be on the road. It'll be a long trip. It's her journey, not mine. But it'll be a symbolic journey for me. This is where it all starts."

"I understand," Kino said, as the man teared up again.

"That was a fun story. Everyone's got something different to share," said Hermes.

With a quiet laugh, the man said to Kino, "Thanks for listening. Could I ask you a question? From a junior traveler to a veteran?"

"What is it?"

"What's the most important thing to keep in mind on the road?"

"That's easy. It's the same as when you're living at home," Kino replied immediately.

"And what is that?"

"Stay alive. Don't get killed. In other words, do whatever it takes to protect yourself. I could even say it means kill or be killed."

"...Right."

The guardhouse door opened.

A woman stepped outside. She was about the same age as the man and dressed like him, armed with a hand persuader. The man introduced Kino and Hermes to her, and she smiled.

When Kino explained that they would be traveling in the same direction, the woman said sadly, “If only we were traveling by car, we could have gone together... But I’m not worried. I have a trusty bodyguard who’ll keep me safe.”

The man still looked downcast, but the woman gave him a smile.

“Kino,” she said, “if you catch up to us after you finish exit procedures, you should join us for lunch. We’ll probably stop at the lakeshore for a break.”

Kino nodded. “Thank you.”

The woman said goodbye to Kino and Hermes, mentioning that their carriage was loaded and waiting outside. “Let’s go,” she said to the man. He nodded.

They left through the gates.

“Never pass up anything free. Let’s catch up to them before noon,” Kino said, pushing Hermes to the guardhouse.

“You’re such a cheapskate.”

“I...I guess that’s true.”

They made it out of the country before noon.

Cutting through the forest was a dirt-paved road wide enough to drive along. Kino and Hermes raced down the path to the lakeshore.

The trees lining the road seemed to rush by, offering quick glimpses of the glimmering lake. The sun sat high in the air, casting beams of light between the foliage.

“It’s just around that corner,” Hermes warned. Kino loosened her grip.

It was hard to see past the curve. Kino made the turn and found the lake on the left. Two horses were tethered there, next to the resting man and woman.

Kino slowed as she approached. The man with the rifle spotted her and waved.

Stopping a short distance from the pair, Kino propped up Hermes on his stand. She took off her goggles and let them hang from her neck.

“Hello. I’ve caught up for lunch.”

The man put down his cup and stood. "That was fast. Horses don't hold a candle to motorrads. We were just starting on tea." His back turned to the woman, he took several steps towards Kino.

The woman drew her hand persuader and slowly rose. She gripped it with both hands and pointed it at the man's back.

BANG.

A casing popped into the air. The bullet drove a hole into the man's shoulder. Kino leapt back on reflex.

"Agh!"

The man screamed, back arching.

BANG.

A second shot, this time in his right thigh.

BANG.

The third shot, in his left thigh.

The man lost his balance and crumpled on top of the rifle on his back.

The woman rushed over and put her heel down on the rifle. Then she fired twice, hitting the man once in each shoulder.

BANG. BANG.

"Urgh!"

Each time, the man screamed in agony.

The woman pulled the rifle from under him and placed it behind her on the ground.

The dumbfounded man lay on the ground, covered in wounds and spilling blood, and looked up at the woman.

"Ah... Why... Who...?"

The woman replied indifferently, "It was me, obviously. Does it hurt?"

The man nodded feebly.

The woman nodded and turned to Kino. “Are you going to shoot me to save him?”

Kino shook her head, her right hand partway to Cannon.

The woman looked back at the man.

“Why...? Why...?”

Cold sweat dotted his face. He was in pain and confusion.

“Why did I shoot you?”

The man nodded, eyes wide.

“Why else? Because I wanted to kill you.”

“Why...?”

“Because I can’t forgive you for taking away the man I loved. I will never forgive you.”

The man was silent.

“That’s not all. Those letters you sent me every month like clockwork all said the same thing. Always apologizing. Crammed to the corners with ‘please forgive me’ and ‘I’ll devote the rest of my life to paying for my crimes’. But you know what they looked like to me? Self-centered ramblings. Maybe some people might accept that. They might accept that you were suffering in prison and that you were the victim you made yourself out to be. And I have no intention of saying that that’s wrong. But I’m different. The pain of losing my boyfriend at your hands got worse and worse over the years. It built up each time you sent me another letter. With each letter, I was reminded that the man who killed him was still alive and well. It hurt. So I decided to take revenge.”

The man lay prone on the ground. He was growing pale.

“Look,” the woman said, unfazed, “This is what I think. Maybe you assumed that if you told the bereaved how sorry you were, you could tell yourself you were doing a good thing and now deserved forgiveness. But that’s called self-satisfaction. Trying to find comfort for yourself. And what were you doing while I wallowed in despair? You lived in a safe facility, with a nice, orderly routine set out for you. You didn’t have to worry about hunger or shelter in there. Worst of

all, after ten years of that life, you would be free. You could go back to life without a care in the world. Just the thought of my boyfriend's murderer walking free on the streets, smiling with a girlfriend of his own...it made my blood boil. I couldn't let that happen."

"B-but..."

BANG.

She shot him in the ear. His torn earlobe started bleeding, but it was just a drop in the bucket compared to the rest of his wounds.

"Don't interrupt me. ...So I decided to go through with it. I would take you outside the country, where the laws don't matter, and kill you with my own two hands. I made all the preparations. I practiced hiding my emotions so I could stay calm in front of you. So I could move without hesitating for even a second. I practiced smiling. And I worked my hands to the bone, saving money for this journey. And I even bought a persuader. An awful weapon I thought I'd never have anything to do with. I bought it with the money you sent me. Then I practiced marksmanship so I could kill you. I researched ammunition to find out what type would make you suffer most. What do you think? Did my research pay off? Are you listening to me?"

She looked down at his face.

He was lying on the ground, unmoving. Tears streamed from his wide eyes down his temples.

"Please..." he whispered, "Please, no...not like this...I don't want to die...not here...I want to go home...I don't want to die..."

"You're not the only one who thought that," the woman said.

She armed the safety on her persuader and holstered it. Then she turned and picked up the rifle. With a practiced hand, she disarmed the safety and walked around to the man's feet as he lay spread-eagle on the lakeshore.

Holding the rifle at waist-level, the woman pressed the button on the laser sight next to the scope. A red light appeared on the man's chin.

"Please...forgive me..." the man begged, his white lips moving weakly.

With a look of pure, unadulterated satisfaction, the woman nodded again and again and smiled.

"All right. You know, all this time, I'd wanted to forgive you. Do you remember what you said in your letters? That you'd devote your life to paying me back. I'm just claiming what you offered. I'm going to take your life. The sooner the better, don't you agree?"

She pulled the trigger.

Again and again.

Each time, the recoil pushed her back and forced her heels into the ground. But she resisted and kept shooting on and on.

Inside the deep green wood, next to a clear lake reflecting the bright blue sky, two people remained standing.

Two horses were tethered nearby, and a motorrad was propped up on its stand.

A headless man lay on the ground.

The woman slowly sank and laid down the empty rifle.

She looked like a heavy burden had been lifted from her shoulders. She was smiling, free as the birds in the clear sky.

"Ah..." she sighed. "I think I can finally forgive you. Let me make it official. I forgive you. It's what you wanted, isn't it? You've been asking for it for years. So now I'm making your wish come true. I forgive you. I forgive you for everything."

A fresh grave was dug next to the lakeshore. A rifle stuck out of it like a headstone.

The woman knelt there and clasped her hands in prayer.

Soon, she rose and turned to Kino.

"Kino, you could have shot me if you wanted. So why didn't you?"

"Because I'm no god. That's all."

"Yeah. Kino is just Kino."

"Really? All right. Thank you for helping me with the grave."

"Not at all."

All the gear had been unloaded from the man's horse. The woman went to it and whispered, "You're free now. You can go live in the woods, or go back to the gates and serve again."

She patted it on the back, and it stepped forward in surprise. But the horse soon took one last look and disappeared into the forest.

"What will you do now?" Kino asked.

"My journey is over," the woman replied, "I'm going back home to live out my days with the memories of the dead."

"I see. Take care."

"Thank you. And I'm sorry for not treating you to lunch."

"It's all right."

The woman collected what they couldn't bury of the man's belongings, and loaded them onto her own horse. She climbed on and waved, smiling.

"Goodbye."

The horse trotted off, turning the corner into the woods and out of sight.

"Phew..." Kino sighed.

"You were right, Kino. I'm surprised. And impressed, too," said Hermes.

"Yeah. Never pass up anything free."

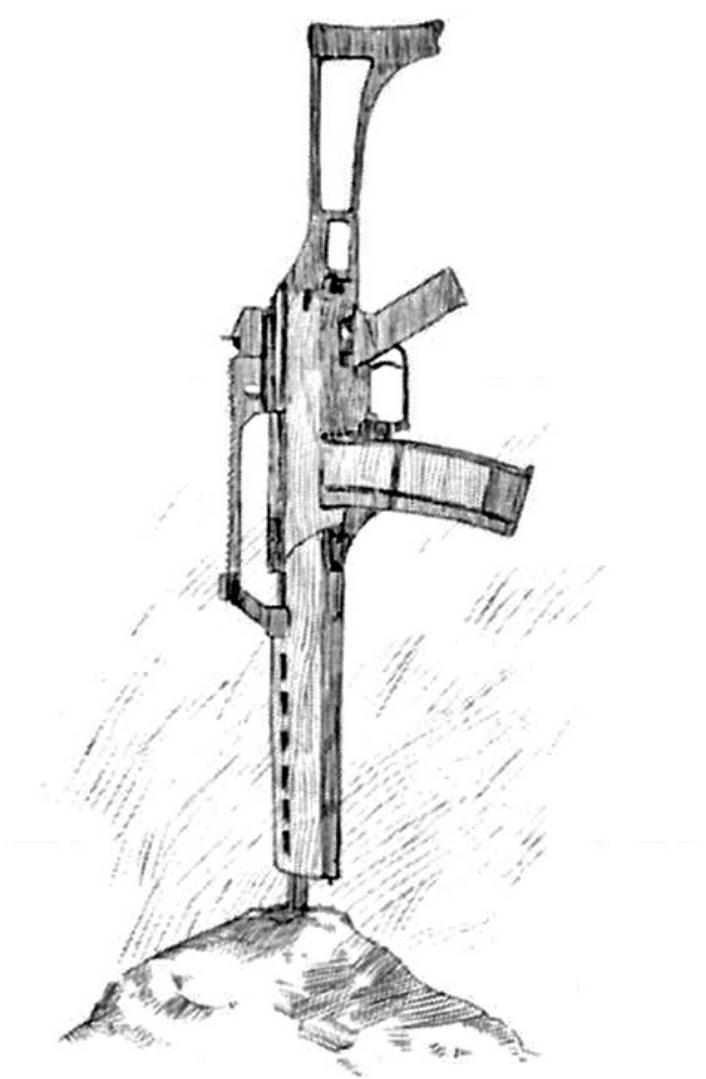
"You're such a cheapskate."

"I...I guess that's true."

There was a fresh grave on the now-deserted lakeshore.

A rifle stuck out of it like a headstone.

It was military-grade with a plastic frame, but missing a scope.





Chapter 2: Her Journey -Love and Bullets-

Pillars of stone stood littered like buildings on the sand.

Hundreds of stone pillars defied the elements as they overlooked the flatlands in an otherworldly forest of rock.

The sand was dotted with clumps of slender grass. Hot, dry gusts sometimes swept between the pillars. There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Next to one of the pillars, inside its short shadow, sat three people.

One was a young person in a white shirt and a black vest, armed with a thigh-holstered hand persuader. To the back was a motorrad fully laden with travel gear, propped up on its center stand.

The second and third people were a man and a woman, both in their late twenties and dressed light. The woman had a slim face with her hair pulled into a ponytail. The man, in contrast, was large and well-built. Behind them were two horses laden with travel gear.

"So what is it that you wanted to tell me so desperately?" asked the young person.

"You see, Kino, I wanted to plead with you to forsake violence," said the woman.

Kino seemed mildly surprised.

The woman continued in a heartfelt voice, "We have to combat violence not with more violence, but love. Love that comes from kindness and honesty. It's the only real solution to a problem humans have struggled with for all of history. I hope you'll understand, Kino, and live out this ideology as you travel. It won't be hard, I promise you. Love, you see, solves all problems."

The man sat behind her with a silent smile.

"I know this sounds very pushy of me, but I honestly think it's not impossible to convince the entire world to share the same idea. I mean, think about how we consider water. Everyone agrees it's necessary. Everyone gets thirsty and

needs water to live. It's the same thing. I think we can all agree that people shouldn't fight one another, and that we all have to solve these problems with love," the woman said, excited, "Love is the answer. Selfless love. It's the most important element in the world. A lofty concept that exists in all of our hearts. And we can nurture this love to eliminate all conflict!" she declared, not even bothering to wipe the sweat off her brow, "Now you understand, don't you? Why we shouldn't arm ourselves? Once you realize that there is no need for violence, you lose all need for weapons. And by doing so, we'll be making the world a better place. All this with one simple ideology. Just think about it! If we can all face the same direction and walk together, we can lay down our conflicts and move forward with nothing but love! It's so important to create that kind of community!"

Kino listened quietly as the woman pontificated. At times she didn't make sense and her grammar occasionally degenerated, but Kino kept up eye contact and nodded slightly.

"In other words, we can live without fighting! I am proof! I am unarmed. I've met so many people on my travels, but I've never been in danger. My partner here is armed, but he's only ever used his persuaders for hunting. Isn't it amazing? It's because I approach people with love that they lose their will to fight. They all understood me. See? People *can* understand one another! So that's why—"

The woman continued to describe her worldview and opinions. She went on for a very long time.

"And that's all I have to say!"

The woman finally finished, drenched in sweat. She heaved a sigh and received a cold cup of tea from the man. "Now please tell me what you think," she said to Kino.

Kino looked her in the eye. "I think you're amazing. I can tell how genuine your arguments are. Until now, I've been shooting people without mercy to protect myself, but maybe none of that was necessary after all."

"Right? Right?" the woman nodded.

"I've decided to follow your ways. I will live out this ideology of love—I'll sell

my weapons at the next country I visit and live without harming anyone else.”

“I’m so glad you understand!” the woman smiled and took Kino’s hands in hers. “It’s such a blessing to have met you, Kino! If you happen to meet anyone on your journey who reminds you of the person you once were, I want you to tell them the truth! Open their eyes to love and peace! We’re going to change the world, one person at a time, spreading this message to every corner of the earth! And one day, love will resolve every conflict! Just thinking about it brings tears to my eyes! Thank you so much for giving me your time!”

“If you’ll excuse us, then. Safe travels,” Kino said, getting the motorrad ready to leave.

“Thank you. All the best on your journey. Let’s meet again someday,” the woman replied, waving.

Kino said goodbye to the pair and pushed the motorrad out of the cluster of pillars.

“Let’s go, Hermes. We wasted too much time back there,” Kino whispered.

“Yeah,” Hermes replied.

“I’m just going to go tell them which way to go,” the man said, rising from his seat and going after Kino.

Holstered on either side of his belt for simultaneous fire were .45 caliber automatic hand persuaders with long custom magazines. The barrels were affixed with screw threads for suppressor attachments.

The man reached Kino just as she was starting Hermes, a short distance from the woman.

“Kino. Hermes. Thank you for sitting through all of that. And thank you for making her happy. I mean it. Thank you so much,” he said with a smile.

Kino gave a wry grin. “I’d have left if you weren’t sitting there behind her.”

“I knew you’d say that,” the man replied with a chuckle.

Kino narrowed her eyes. “We happened across thirteen corpses on a rocky mountain a week ago. None of them had fired a single shot. They were all killed with .45 caliber bullets. Yours.”

The man nodded. "They listened to the whole spiel too, but afterwards, they came after us to kill me and get at her. So I put them to rest," he said indifferently.

"This might be a rude question," Kino said, "But why are you escorting her? Your skills could get you much better work."

"Yeah. And you're total opposites, too," Hermes agreed.

"Because I love her," the man answered without missing a beat.

"What?" "What?"

"I've loved her for years. We were born and raised in the same country. She was always against violence. Said violence was always wrong, and that love could solve everything. But I believed that without power, you wouldn't be able to do anything. That you wouldn't be able to protect the weak from violence. So I studied combat, marksmanship, and other fighting skills. After finishing school, I joined the military. I thought she was a weirdo. But at some point, I fell for her like a ton of bricks. I don't know why, and I don't care. I always loved coming home on leave and listening to her lecture me on the folly of violence."

The man glanced back. The woman was sitting on a rock, looking up at the sky with a contented expression.

"Once we were both adults, she told me she wanted to go on a journey around the world to preach love and peace. That that was her mission in life. Everyone tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen. She started preparing by herself. So I quit the military and asked her to let me go with her."

"I'm surprised she let you," Kino remarked.

"It was easy. I told her that she convinced me to leave the military. I told her I would preach love and peace with her, even if it meant I was just her luggage boy. And she said yes."

"I see." "I get it."

"Her ideals might never come true, but I love seeing her so happy and optimistic. I love watching her charge straight for her goal. And I want to protect her, ideologies be damned. I'll be by her side, doing all the dirty work

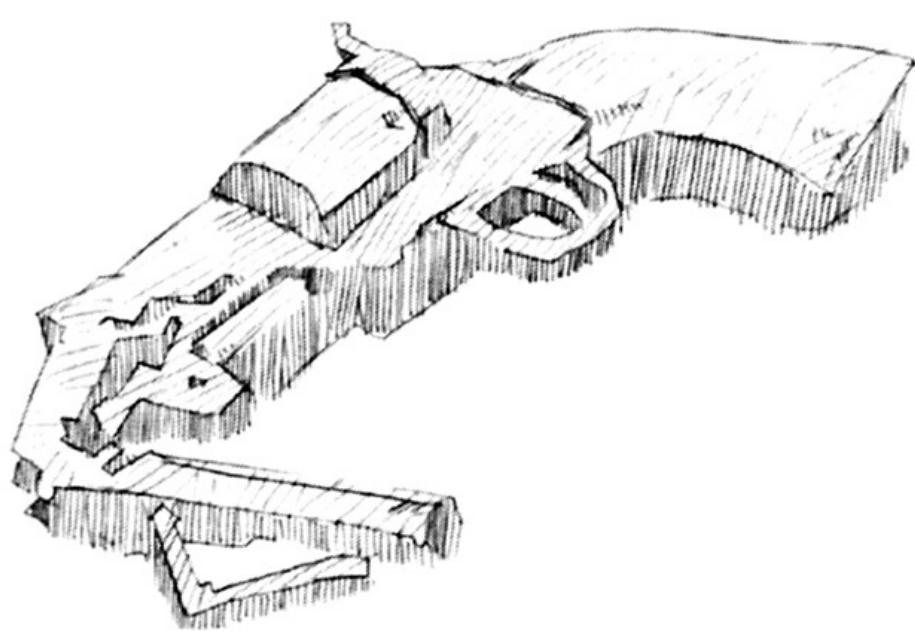
and taking lives if necessary. For her sake, I'm willing turn the whole world against me," he said quietly.

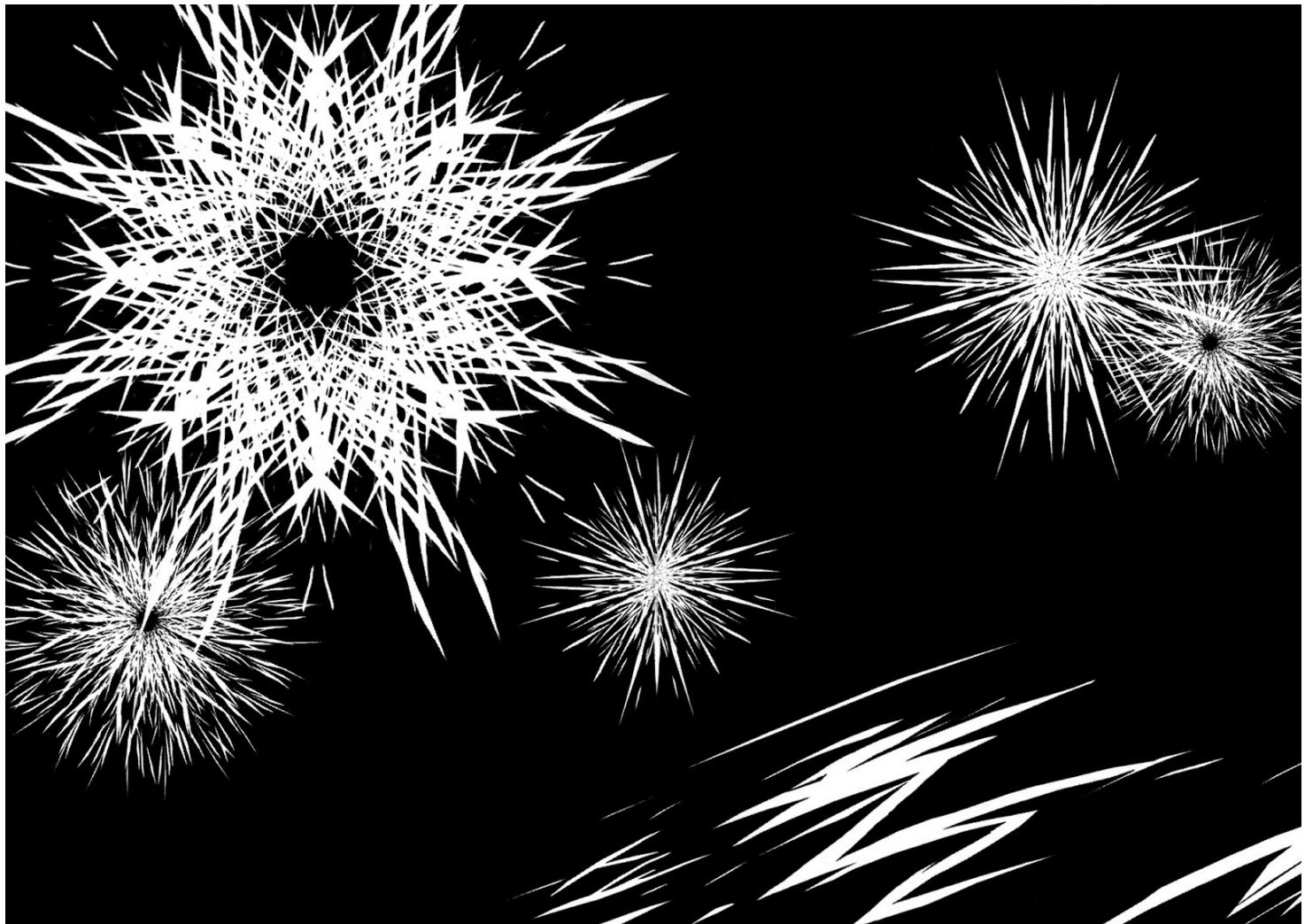
"Sounds like you're ready to declare war on the world," Hermes joked.

"I see," Kino said, and added, "Your story was more interesting than hers."

"Thanks. Take care, then. Hope we run into each other again," the man replied, holding out his right hand. "Until then, shoot anyone who tries to kill you."

"Thank you. I will," Kino replied, accepting the handshake.





Chapter 3: The Country of Fireworks -Fire at Will!-

"It's hot, Kino," said the motorrad.

The motorrad had two compartments hanging from either side of its rear wheel, and a large suitcase and a sleeping bag secured to the luggage rack. It was propped up on its stand.

"It is," replied Kino, the rider. She was a young human with short black hair and large eyes. Kino wore an unbuttoned black vest over her white shirt, and had a belt around her waist. Secured to her right thigh was a holstered hand persuader.

They were in a forest surrounded by low mountains, stopped on the lone road through the woods. The path was dirt-paved and lined with trees, making it hard to see anything beyond.

Kino sat in the shade of a particularly large tree on the roadside.

The forest was hot and humid, the air mercilessly dense and heavy. A gentle wind caressed the very tops of the trees, which enjoyed a privilege everything below did not. Hundreds of cicadas wailed from every direction.

Kino took a sip from her water canteen. "And it's lukewarm."

"I'm not surprised."

Though she was completely still, a droplet of sweat slid down her cheek. Overhead was a clear sky ruthlessly lit by the summer sun. At her feet, an ant was crawling across a mosaic of shadow and sun-cast dirt.

"I hope the next country has air conditioning... I just want some relief, even if it's only three days... Even if it's only at night," Kino mumbled.

"What if they don't even have fans or showers?"

"I don't want to think about it."

Kino rose from her seat. She slapped away the dirt, put away her canteen,

and put on the hat she had been fanning herself with.

"Let's go, Hermes. We're almost there."

"All right," Hermes replied.

Kino climbed on and started the engine. The engine began roaring, and the cicadas nearby kicked up their cries a notch, as if trying to compete.

The forest was hotter than a sauna, and loud to boot.

"Finally," Kino exhaled, screeching to a stop. The forest on one side of the road gave way to a sudden drop-off, clearing the view. Beyond was a rugged green land and a grey wall rising into the sky. The wall followed the slopes of the mountains, their heights often slightly mismatched.

"Maybe you can go for a swim," Hermes said. On the left side of the wall, to the south, was something blue—and it was not the sky.

Kino and Hermes followed the road and reached the bottom of a valley. They continued forward and finally reached the wall.

"Wow," Hermes exclaimed. Kino stopped and looked up.

The wall was towering over the woods. The section they reached stood like a dam filling the valley, rising higher than the mountains on either side and almost high enough to be level with the rest of the wall. Kino and Hermes stood in its shadow.

Upon closer inspection, the wall was sleek and showed signs of being patched up with plates of the same material.

"Is this some kind of stone?" Hermes wondered. "I don't think it's metal."

"It looks hard."

At the far end of the road was the door into the wall, firmly shut and made of the same material. It would have been unrecognizable if not for the outline marked around it. There was no one around. Not even a guardhouse stood there.

Amidst the cries of the cicadas, Kino disembarked and approached the wall. "I see a button here, around hand-level."

"Buttons are meant to be pressed."

Kino pressed the button.

There was an electronic chime.

Kino took off her hat to wipe the sweat from her brow, when she heard a voice from the wall.

"Hello? Ah, a traveler! Please come in. I'll open the door for you in a second."

The door slowly slid up.

"Wow, security's really light," Hermes said. Kino looked equally confused.

It was not long afterwards that the door opened completely and Kino and Hermes understood why.

Beyond the door was another wall.

They went through the same process and stepped through the second wall.

Beyond that was a third wall. The third wall's door did not open until the one behind it closed.

The gaps between the walls were perpetually shaded from the sun, but the air was still thick and hot. Overhead, Kino could see the narrow sky, sliced longways by the walls around her.

The mountains on either side also looked like slices. They had been completely cleared of trees, the grassy slopes left dotted with large rectangular boxes.

"Those containers are traps. If the country gets invaded, they blow up charges and drop them into the gaps in the walls to block the doors," Hermes explained.

Past the third door, they found the fourth door and a building that seemed to be buried in the wall. An immigrations officer was waiting outside.

The moment they stepped through the door, Kino gave a quiet sigh.

"Is the air conditioning a bit cold for you, Traveler?" asked the officer.

Kino and Hermes were granted permission for entry without much in the way of bureaucracy.

According to the immigrations officers, this country received very few visitors. Kino and Hermes were the first travelers to arrive in half a year.

"Welcome to our country, Kino. Hermes. Are you visiting for the fireworks festival?" asked one of the officers, a middle-aged woman.

Kino shook her head. The officers were surprised.

"You're in luck. We're holding our annual summer fireworks festival tomorrow night on the south beach. It's a spectacular event. Don't miss it!"

Beyond the fourth wall, the road in the forest valley continued. But this time, it was paved and even lined with streetlights.

Kino opened the map she received at the guardhouse.

Mountains covered most of the country, and the southern edge was a bay with a twisting shoreline. The walls encircled the entire country, opening at the bay.

At the center of the bay was an arc-shaped beach, and a street in the middle that led northward. That area was the only flatland in the country, with residences crowding the vicinity of the thoroughfare. At the northern end of the road were government offices and properties, behind which were the mountains.

"We're right around here," Kino said, pointing at the easternmost gate. They had a long way to go before they reached the middle of the country.

Kino and Hermes continued westward. The road climbed up the mountain and twisted along the range. Wide guardrails painted white lined the edge of the pavement.

"This is much easier to run on," Hermes said.

The sun continued beating down on them, and the pavement exuded heat. But Kino and Hermes continued onwards, eventually spotting a large cemetery on the mountainside to their right. The land was turned into a large staircase dotted with headstones arranged neatly on each level.

Further along, the valley began to widen. They spotted more houses on the way, and more vehicles on the road. All the vehicles were the same four-wheel-

drive models, identical save for the coloring.

"That's funny. Is that the only model in the country?" Hermes wondered.

"I'm not sure. Maybe it's a fad."

Once they were out of the valley, Kino and Hermes found themselves in the flatlands at the center of the map. The country was suddenly bustling with life, filled with buildings and people.

Kino and Hermes finally reached the thoroughfare that vertically bisected the country. It was wide with many lanes, pointed directly at the sea in the south, and congested because it was almost dusk. Running down the middle of the street was an elevated walkway lined with trees, which served as a pedestrian path and a park. People carrying parasols went to and fro.

After making a right, Kino and Hermes waited for the signal to change. That was when a large armored vehicle emerged from a side street and turned the corner in front of them. It was angular with tires the height of a small child. But contrary to its design, the vehicle was unarmed and painted a bright orange.

The armored vehicle came to a stop past the corner. The metal door at the back opened, and people in ordinary clothing spilled onto the sidewalk. Sweaty commuters who had been waiting in line boarded the vehicle to replace them. Once everyone was aboard, the door closed and the vehicle rejoined traffic, lights blinking.

"You think that's supposed to be a bus, Kino?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a fad."

The officers had directed Kino and Hermes to a hotel in the city. It was a small three-story building at the back of the thoroughfare.

The hotel was heavily air-conditioned, cold enough to be a separate country from the city outside. Kino and Hermes were welcomed into their room. It was neither too large nor too small.

"It's nice and cool here," Kino said, collapsing onto bed and looking up at the ceiling.

"Sure, sure. Don't fall asleep, Kino. You have things to do," Hermes nagged.

"Right."

Reluctantly, Kino got up and unloaded her things. And she took out a small bag from her suitcase. It contained dirty shirts and other items of clothing.

"Hygiene is important, Kino. You can't go out in public wearing a stinky shirt."

"Yeah."

Kino asked the hotel if she could borrow a washing machine. She turned down their paid laundromat services and chose to use a washing machine free of charge.

By the time she had strung up a rope in her room and hung her clothes to dry, it was evening.

"Good job, Kino."

"I'm tired."

Afterwards, Kino had dinner, enjoyed a thorough shower, and quickly fell asleep.

The next day, Kino rose at dawn.

She did maintenance on her persuaders and did quiet exercises and drills before taking another shower. Then she folded up her soft, dry clothes and put them into her suitcase.

During breakfast, Kino heard small popping noises outside. Someone explained that it was a signal declaring that the weather was good enough for the fireworks to take place as scheduled.

Kino smacked Hermes awake and set out to sightsee.

The sky was clear. Wispy clouds floated by in small clumps, doing nothing to shield the world from the blinding morning sun. It was warm, and only likely to get warmer.

The hotel management recommended that Kino and Hermes visit the civic centers at the end of the thoroughfare. The district was almost deserted because it was a holiday. The wooden buildings had originally been temples, boasting a distinct architectural style. To the north was a dense forest and a

park with a pond. There was also a roofed stage with a sign that read, ‘Historic Dance Hall’.

A long staircase ran up the mountainside. Kino parked Hermes and climbed the stairs alone. When she turned, she saw the thoroughfare and the beach and the sea at the end. The water was a beautiful blue, its surface reflecting the sky. Each wave distorted its color and created multicolored ripples. Green mountains bordered either side of the sea, each topped by the end of the country’s walls and a tall lighthouse.

When Kino climbed back down, she found countless pigeons perched on Hermes.

“I won’t get mad if you decide to have all these pigeons for dinner today, Kino,” said the white mass hidden in the flock.

“It’s so hot.”

“Why not go for a swim?”

Kino and Hermes went to the thoroughfare and drove due south, reaching the seaside. The coast went on in a perfect arc, dotted by small restaurants and leisure facilities. Beach-goers relaxed on the sand and enjoyed the water as Kino and Hermes watched from the roadside.

“And you don’t even have a swimsuit. It’s perfect,” Hermes remarked.

The locals were having a wonderful time, wearing absolutely nothing.

They returned to the hotel for lunch.

“I’ll need to get some rest now if I want to stay up late.”

Back in her room, Kino put the air conditioning on full-blast and wrapped herself up in her blankets and sheets.

“This is heavenly...”

“Only because you’re dirt-poor.”

“Wake me up on time.”

“Okay.”

Afternoon was halfway gone by the time Kino opened her eyes. She took

Hermes down the thoroughfare to the beach once more, where crowds were beginning to gather. Stalls were popping up by the road and colorful mats decorated the beach.

Kino gave up on getting a seaside seat and parked Hermes on the sidewalk. She took a seat on the ‘No Vehicles Past This Point’ sign next to him.

Watching the beach fill up, they waited for the festival to begin.

The sun slowly fell towards the mountains, and the sky was dyed a reddish orange. Daylight faded and the walls swallowed the sun. Lights came on in the stalls.

Several ships were floating close to shore. The decks of the metallic mid-sized vessels were fully loaded with cargo covered in silvery sheets. The mountainsides on either side of the beach were crowded with vehicles, also loaded with covered cargo.

“They’re shooting the fireworks from the ships and the vehicles.”

“Hm. Have you ever seen fireworks, Kino?”

“Not on this scale.”

Traffic began to clear as festival-goers finished gathering. Kino asked Hermes to wait and departed, coming back with a large paper bowl.

“What’s what?”

“They were selling it at that stand. They shave ice until it’s fine dust, and top it with sugar-boiled beans and sweet syrup. I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I like it. It’s cold and sweet.”

Kino took a big spoonful of ice and ate.

“You’ll get a stomachache if you eat that much ice,” Hermes warned.

The sun finally set completely. The last glow of daylight was sucked into the horizon, and the sky grew darker. A soft breeze blew in from the right, sapping heat from the pavement.

“Mmph.”

Kino grimaced mid-bite.

"What's wrong?"

"I learned something about this dessert."

"Yeah?"

"If you eat too much at once, it gives you a headache..."

"I don't believe this..."

Small popping noises punctuated the air as three streams of white smoke were sprayed into the sky.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. For once, we're glad the forecast was wrong. No showers are expected tonight, and the show will go on as scheduled," said the emcee's voice, "Now, let the show begin!"

There was a wave of applause. People on the ships and by the vehicles on the mountainsides immediately got to work, pulling off the waterproof sheets from the piles of cargo.

The ships spewed fire.

Bright red fireballs rose into the air from the ships lined in a row. Hundreds of thousands of burning particles burst like airborne fountains. A second later, a ripping noise hit the beach.

As the crowds clapped, the fireworks shrieked into the air in arcs and fell into the sea.

Then the fountains of fire began to tremble. The lines they drew in the sky curved left and right, like curtains in the breeze.

For a moment, the lights faded and the last spark disappeared. But the darkness was quickly broken again by a splendid display of color, as lines of light crisscrossed in the dark purple sky. The ships on the sea, lit by blinding yellow glows, cast long shadows on the water's surface.

The second the lights from below came to an end, red fireworks came flying from the mountainsides. They rose up in the blink of an eye, crossed, and disappeared past the mountains.

"So this is what a real fireworks show is like," Kino gasped.

"I don't think this is a normal fireworks show," said Hermes.

"Really?" Kino asked, eyes locked on the lights in the sky.

"They don't normally use stuff like that," Hermes replied. The fireworks from the ships were being fired out of 20mm gatling guns, which could launch 100 rounds per second out of six barrels.

"But it's still beautiful," said Kino. Three blinding lights rose from the ships, one from the center and two from either side, crossing into a triangle in the sky.

Tense of thousands of rounds later, the fireworks show came to an end.

Smoke filled the air over the beach.

"Please stand by for the next performance," said the emcee.

Kino scooped up another spoonful of ice and shoveled it into her mouth.

The ships on the water began to move, eventually all disappearing from sight.

"Thank you for your patience. Please sit back and enjoy our annual underwater fireworks show."

A lone ship began zooming across the water from the left side of the beach to the right, dropping round objects in its wake.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

The objects exploded in the sea, sending columns of water rocketing into the air around pillars of orange blasts. The shapes held for only a second at a time, each column replaced by another as soon as it fell. The impacts from the blasts carried across the water and the beach all the way to the road.

The pillars went all the way across the venue, until the ship made a U-turn and doubled back. They went from right to left this time, crossing the bay again.

"Those are fueled depth charges. What a waste," Hermes muttered, his voice drowned out by a deafening wave of applause.

Once the smoke had cleared, the emcee's laid-back voice returned. "Next, we have this year's special display. Please direct your attention to the left side of the beach."

For a split second, a long, thin stream of light shot into the air from the

mountainside on the left. A massive cylinder was launched into the air, sparks shooting behind. At the same time, it began to spin in a trail of smoke. Cubical boxes were stuck to the cylinder like scales, densely clustered together.

The moment the cylinder crossed the beach, brilliant orbs of light came spilling out of the boxes. They were scattered from the spinning cylinder, drawing a spiral high up in the sky.

The spiral of light filled the world above like a gigantic path into the heavens. Everyone squinted, their pupils shrinking. The sky in the background looked even darker. The audience cheered even more loudly.

Eventually, the spiral began to collapse. But the orbs of light continued to shine as they fell like snow over the midsummer beach. The surface of the water caught the lights and mirrored them, instantly filling the world with the glow.

The orbs slowly drifted down and touched the sea, extinguishing themselves and their mirror images. When the final light disappeared, a hushed darkness fell over the beach.

The surface-to-surface missile equipped with flare dispensers flew off into the distance, never to return.

The fireworks show continued. Blinding lights swung back and forth in midair before falling to the sea. Hundreds of white lights exploded. Glowing red orbs drew shaky lines in the sky. Flares attached to parachutes. Cannon shells programmed to explode in midair. Gatling rounds. All fired from the mountainsides.

The display lit up the beach as clear as day.

Kino looked around. She saw families with children, couples, and friends enjoying the show from the road. The lights would engrave themselves into the audience's memories as they looked on with smiles on their faces.

Silently, Kino rose from her seat and took three steps to reach Hermes. She sat on the luggage rack.

"What is it?" asked Hermes, light reflecting off his fuel tank.

"Want some?" Kino offered, holding out her bowl.

"I appreciate the sentiment."

"You're welcome."

Sitting on Hermes, Kino watched the dazzling show and finished the rest of her melting ice.

The sea breeze was getting stronger and colder.

The flurry of light and sound suddenly disappeared. Signals went off again to mark the end of the show.

People returned home on armored buses or by foot.

The crowds passed by with smiles on their faces and conversations on their lips. The cool breeze and the crashing of the waves filled the ambience. And Kino and Hermes remained, waiting for the roads to clear.

When they returned to the hotel, Kino had a cup of tea. The manager asked her about the festival. Kino replied that it was beautiful.

"But isn't it a waste, using weapons for stuff like this?" asked Hermes. The balding middle-aged manager was taken aback.

"Oh, didn't you know?"

"About what?" "No."

"Then let me explain. Those weapons and the ammunition—they're all gifts," the manager said, taking a seat across from Kino. "We didn't manufacture them. You saw the ships, right? Once a month or so, one of those ships reaches our shores, unmanned, with containers of the stuff. Military gear and weapons, I mean."

"It really is a gift."

"From who?"

"We have no idea. And we don't know why they're sending these things, either. They started arriving about a hundred years ago, when we were still a small country. No one came to get them, so we decided to accept them as gifts from above and made use of them."

"I see. So the four-wheel-drive and armored vehicles are gifts too?"

"Indeed they are. They've made transportation so much easier. And the ships have been very helpful for our fisheries. We take apart the freight containers and use them for our buildings and walls. But we ran into a problem."

"Like what?"

"We have too much of the stuff. It's wonderful that cars are easy to get, but now everyone has one or more, and the roads are always congested. Before we knew it, we had four layers of walls around us. Is there any point to building more? These days, we've been dumping containers in the mountains."

"I thought they were traps," Hermes said, shocked.

The manager shook his head. "We have no need for traps. After all, we've never been attacked. We don't even have a military, for that matter. No neighbors nearby to invade us, after all."

"So that's why you have so many weapons left over," Kino concluded.

"That's right. It's honestly a headache, having all these missiles and machine guns and explosives on our hands. For a while we dumped them in the mountains outside the country, but one day the area was struck by lightning, causing a massive explosion. After that, we tried to dispose of them by firing them over the sea, but the government received noise complaints."

"That's how they came up with the fireworks show?" asked Hermes.

"Yes. We decided to take a different perspective. We could use up all the materials at once, and make it an annual event for the public. It was two birds with one stone—now we have a wonderful festival that the whole country looks forward to. I can't wait for next year's show."

The next day. It was the third day since Kino's arrival.

Kino and Hermes left through the western gates. They resumed their journey down the forest path.

Not long after leaving the country, they encountered a steep climb that seemed to reach into the blue skies.

"People," Hermes said. Kino stopped.

They were at a mountaintop obscured by trees. There Kino spotted four men in green.

They were in camouflage gear with their faces and hands also painted green. The men were moving their things onto a small four-wheel-drive vehicle parked by the roadside.

"H-hello!" One of the men noticed Kino and Hermes, surprised. Kino turned off the engine and stepped off.

"Are you a traveler? You must be coming from that country over there," said another man.

Kino nodded.

"We've come from a country in the north as scouts. Scoping out that display they do every year like clockwork."

"You're scoping them out?" "Don't you mean 'enjoy'?" asked Kino and Hermes.

The man shook his head. "No. It is our mission to keep an eye on the countries closest to us. This country happens to be one of them, and the most dangerous. I'm sure you could tell from the scale of their drills last night. All those assets they invest into their training exercises."

"Oh. Er...right," Kino said, nodding.

"They pose a grave threat to our nation. They're surrounded by layers of walls and possess mass quantities of weapons and artillery. Our country lives in constant fear of an invasion. They show no signs of aggression yet, but we can never let our guard down. Which is why we make sure to catch their annual drills no matter what."

"Huh. Must be tough work, coming all this way in the heat," said Hermes. The men chuckled bitterly.

"We're more or less used to it now. Good thing, too, since we'll be back next year."

Kino and Hermes said goodbye to the men and continued down the endless road through the forest. It was hot and humid.

When they reached a road that led from east to west, Kino lowered the bill on her hat. The trees provided ample shade everywhere else.

"The fireworks were beautiful," said Hermes.

Kino nodded. "Yeah. It was nice getting to see a real fireworks show."

"I told you, that wasn't a normal one."

"Yeah. But what matters is that it was beautiful."

"That's true."

The motorrad laden with travel gear continued on its way through the forest filled with the cries of cicadas.



Chapter 4: The Country with an Elder -I

Need You-

Once upon a time, there was a country nestled in a wide valley in the rugged mountains.

The country's walls, houses, and city were made of stone carved from the mountains. They were ancient relics built by people in the distant past, now used by their descendants—or settlers who weren't.

Horse-drawn carriages went by at a comfortable pace. Large oxen were being used to plough the fields. It was a simple and peaceful land.

For generations, the country had been guided by a spiritual leader.

Such a person was called an Elder.

The Elder was chosen from among the public through a strictly impartial drawing of lots. The person was then educated and assigned to important tasks. The Elder would abide by strict laws and serve the people as a shining example.

The current Elder was a man just over fifty years of age. He was chosen shortly before the passing of the previous Elder, and had gracefully done all that was required of him for the past two decades. He was respected by the people as their leader.

But half a year ago, the Elder suddenly vanished. The people searched high and low for him, but he was nowhere to be found. They had no idea how he managed to disappear from the country.

Not long afterwards, they received a message from a group of bandits from the mountains. To the people's shock, they announced that they had kidnapped the Elder, and were demanding a ransom for his safe return.

Because the Elder was a very important person, the people all did as the bandits demanded and gathered jewelry, food, and clothing to offer in exchange for the Elder.

But the bandits did not let the Elder go. They continued to threaten his safety,

demanding even more from the people in exchange for his continued well-being.

And the people grew tired.

One day, a traveler came to the village. It was a rare occurrence for the country.

She was an elegantly-dressed young woman who had driven there on an old and battered car. On the holster tied over her right side was a high-caliber persuader.

Something about her told the people that she was strong.

The leaders of the country explained the situation to the woman, fully prepared for rejection. They asked her if she could kill the bandits for them.

The woman asked for details about the bandits' headquarters. Everyone explained to her that the headquarters were at the top of the valley, and that it was impossible to approach from the bottom. The distance also made it impossible to snipe at them from the opposite side of the valley.

The woman thought for a moment and said, "How much will you pay me?"

Once upon a time, there was a valley nestled in the stony, rugged mountains.

The valley was two kilometers wide and hundreds of meters deep. The river that flowed at its base looked like a thread from the top, far enough to give anyone vertigo.

A winding path led up the valley. It was a very narrow road, just wide enough for a car to squeeze through.

At a high place by the road at the top of the valley were a group of huts. One large hut and several smaller ones. This was the bandits' headquarters.

It was morning.

Wispy clouds highlighted the light blue sky. It was a beautiful morning in early summer, when the high-altitude plants moist with the evening fog were at the peak of their beauty.

In front of the huts were three men standing guard with persuaders in hand.

Smoke and the smell of food wafted from inside.

One bandit stepped out of the hut, holding a steaming mug of tea. He walked up to one of the guards and handed it to him.

The moment the guard took the mug with a word of thanks, the two men were enveloped by a bright light.

The radiant sun rose from between the mountain peaks past the opposite side of the valley. The sun illuminated both the headquarters and the valley in a matter of seconds.

The guard narrowed his eyes, raised his mug, and greeted the morning sun.

"Another day," he said. At that very moment, his height was reduced by half.

The man's torso had exploded. His upper body fell at an angle, spilling intestines and blood everywhere. His mug clattered to the ground, too.

The other man stood in utter confusion until his chest burst as his arms and head hit the dirt.

One second later, two gunshots rang out loud and clear across the valley.

Another bewildered guard was blown away.

"E-enemy attack!" another man shouted. Those were his last words.

The two men who emerged from the hut were destroyed simultaneously.

"A sniper! Someone's shooting us down!" one man yelled as he ducked, listening to the deep and terrible bursts of noise. It was like thunder was raining down on them.

A hail of bullets assaulted the hut at the very end. Splinters erupted from the hut each time it took a hit, and it finally collapsed. The people who were sleeping inside were all crushed by the falling rubble.

The other small huts soon collapsed, too. A rolling log fell into the crack of the valley, taking with it several men who were laying flat on the ground before it.

Several bandits holding rifles ran out of the large hut and took shelter behind a rock. But they couldn't tell where the enemy was shooting from, and panicked.

Soon the storm of bullets fell on the boulder, demolishing it in about three hits and blowing apart the three people who were taking shelter behind it.

At the top of the other side of the valley was a woman.

She was sitting on the ground with her legs forward and her back to the sun. In front of her was a sturdy metal tripod, upon which was mounted a persuader as long as a grown man was tall.

This kind of persuader was usually mounted on top of tanks, used to pierce through sturdy things like trucks or armored vehicles. It was not normally for use against humans.

Affixed to the persuader was a scope that looked thick enough to be used in an astronomical observatory.

The woman peered through the scope. She could clearly see the panicking bandits on the other side of the valley.

She took hold of the two rods at the end of the persuader. The woman carefully took aim and pushed the launch lever once with her thumb.

The shot was fired with a terrifying boom. The heavy persuader was rocked by the recoil. Gas poured out of the barrel, hissing and shaking the air. If she hadn't poured water over the ground beforehand, the ensuing cloud of dust might have blinded her completely. An empty shell casing, big enough to use as a vase, fell to the ground.

A huge projectile that made a rifle look powerless in comparison cut through the air, crossed the valley, and halved one man's body mass.

The woman saw through her scope the bandits dragging out a middle-aged man.

"Hey! Can you see this?! Cease fire, or we will kill this man!"

It was obvious that no amount of shouting would get the message across the valley, so the bandits opted to use body language. They made the Elder kneel on the ground, put an automatic persuader to his head, and leered at the direction the shots were coming from. The glare made it impossible for them to see anything but the sun. Their eyes began to hurt.

The Elder, now with a full beard grown over his face, knelt on the ground with his hands in the air and a lost look on his face.

"We will shoot!" The bandit made shooting gestures with his persuader multiple times. He poked the Elder in the head with the barrel.

The woman could see clearly, but she continued to fire away as though it didn't matter.

Each time she fired a shot, the ox that had carried her heavy equipment up the valley trembled as it stood tethered behind her.

"CAN'T YOU SEE THIS?! WE'RE REALLY GOING TO SHOOT!" the bandit with his persuader fixed on the Elder yelled loudly, but the shots just kept on coming. People rushed out of the large hut, but they were powerless to escape death. Even the people still in the huts were killed by the shots that penetrated the walls.

"No..."

The speechless bandit stood at the top of the valley, where only he and the Elder were still alive. Then, one final shot made its way towards him.

The Elder, who was kneeling on the ground with his hands in the air, slowly looked around. The location formerly known as the bandits' headquarters was now their grave. It looked almost like the aftermath of a tomato-throwing festival.

A long time had passed since the final gunshot. The Elder slowly tried to stand up. Suddenly, a shot flew in, cutting through the wind, and blasted apart the boulder behind him. The terrified Elder flinched and sat on the ground again.

Yet more time passed.

The Elder slowly tried to lay down on the ground. This time, the shot came in to the other side, snapping in two a log that had been part of a hut.

"It's a warning shot. I think it's best you stay still."

The Elder obeyed.

The sun was high up in the sky and the blood splattered across the ground was just starting to dry.

As the Elder sat with his face covered in sweat, he heard something like the clip-clop of a horse climbing up the valley. As it got closer, the Elder realized that it was indeed the sound of a horse.

A woman with long black hair dismounted, pulling a large revolver from the holster over her right thigh.

She cautiously approached the Elder.

"You're the Elder, right? I've been hired by your country."

"I...I'm alive..." the Elder managed to mumble, after moments of dumbstruck gaping as he looked up at the woman. He nodded several times in response to the woman's question.

"Of course. Now, I'd like to ask you a few things, Elder. But before that..." The woman pointed her revolver at a bandit lying about two meters behind the Elder. He was a slightly short but handsome young man covered in blood. "You there, get up."

The man opened his eyes. he got up and slowly wiped the sweat from his face, making it clear that he was unarmed. He then raised his hands into the air. "And I was so sure you wouldn't catch me..."

"What are you talking about? I saw you. The first thing you did was take cover behind the Elder," the woman said. "Elder, can you stand?"

The Elder got up. He then took up the hand persuader that one of the bandits was threatening him with earlier, severed arm and all.

"Rotten bandits! How dare you?!"

The Elder shook off the arm from the persuader and pointed it at the man who sat with his hands in the air.

"Elder, we need at least one person alive as a witness. I know how you must feel, but don't kill him," the woman said, holstering her revolver. The Elder lowered the persuader without pulling the trigger. The man shrugged.

"What did my countrymen tell you about me?" the Elder asked the woman.

"They were all very worried about you," she replied.

"I see..." the Elder mumbled, and pointed the hand persuader at the woman.

The man with his hands in the air shrugged again.

"Hah!" the elder snorted. "Them? Worried about me?! Don't make me laugh! Hey! Hands in the air!" he yelled, anger spreading over his face.

"What are you doing? I'm not following your logic, Elder," the woman said calmly, raising her hands to just above shoulder-level.

"It makes perfect sense! If you take me back, they'll forced me to work for nothing again! All because I'm the Elder! I'm sick of that life! Those bastards just picked me at random and took me away from everything I loved! I can't even see my family when I want to see them! I couldn't even be at my parents' deathbeds! They forced me to live as the Elder! They forced me to act 'respectably'! They wasted half of my life! It's not me they want back—they want an Elder. Any Elder will do! I never want to go back to that prison again!" the Elder yelled in one breath. He then lowered his voice. "That's why I'm going to kill you and run away somewhere. I was just getting sick of living with these imbecilic bandits, anyway. I'll go on a journey and start my life over. I've got money, and you've even brought me a horse."

"Don't be so mean to us, Elder. After all, we just did everything you told us to do," the man said.

"Apologies, young man. I owe you a great deal for all of this. Will you come with me? I'll make you my subordinate."

"I'll have to decline."

"Then once I kill this woman, I'll make sure to kill you as well." The Elder grinned.

The man, with his hands still in the air, turned to the woman, who was also holding her hands in the air.

"Hey, Miss Revolver. What do you think about this man?"

"I wonder. I have a lot of thoughts, sure, but now isn't the time for this, is it?"

"True."

The man and the woman looked at the Elder.

The woman spoke. "Elder, there's one thing I want to ask you."

The Elder grinned. "What is it? Trying to beg for mercy?"

"No. It's just that you escaped your 'prison' without anyone noticing. Everyone's very curious to know how you did."

"That's it?" The Elder snorted. "It's simple. When I was a student, I studied archaeology. I used to research the structure of this country. One day, I happened to hear from an old man that the sewers were once used as an emergency escape route for kings. No one knows about it now, and that's how I left the country. That's when I met these foolish bandits. How lucky I was that everyone did exactly as I wished!"

"I see." The woman nodded. The man also looked as though he was marveling at the revelation. "A wonderful escape route. It would be best to block it off as soon as possible."

"Of course. Now you finally start talking sense. But it's too late." The Elder chuckled. He then pointed the persuader at the woman. "Now, you're going to have to die for me. Where should I shoot first? Your arms? Legs? Well? Where do you suggest? Hm?"

As the Elder spoke with a delighted look on his face, the man shook his head, exasperated.

"I'll start with your legs!" the Elder spat, pointing the persuader at the woman's legs and pulling the trigger.

A clear click rang out across the valley.

"What?"

The Elder pulled the trigger again. There was another clear click.

"Huh?"

"Elder, that persuader's not loaded. See that red mark beside the hole where the empty shells are supposed to come out? It's not gonna shoot anything," the man said.

The woman slowly drew her revolver and pointed at the Elder, who scrambled to load his persuader. She pulled the trigger.

"Ah, too late."

"Actually, Elder," the woman said, looking down upon the fallen Elder. "I received three requests from your country. The first was to eliminate the bandits, and the second was to figure out the secret of your escape. The third was to come back to their country to report that the Elder was already dead. The leaders of your homeland have already abandoned you. But they couldn't just make that public, since the people are still waiting for you. So they asked me to claim that you were dead, whether or not you actually were. Then the people would believe that you were killed by the bandits, and would move on to choose a new Elder. Maybe even as soon as tomorrow. I heard it's going to be decided by drawing lots again."

The Elder was silent.

"So you're free, as long as you don't go back to that country. They said you could go anywhere you pleased. And now I've held up my end of the bargain."

The Elder was silent. The man spoke in his place. "I'm so happy for you, Elder! You got your wish after all!"

The Elder was lying flat on the ground, looking up at the sky with his eyes wide open.

Blood was flowing from his mouth.

"Well, now." The woman holstered her revolver and turned to the man.

The man had already gotten to his feet, wiping off someone else's drying blood off himself with a grimace.

"You weren't one of the bandits to begin with, were you?" the woman asked.

The man wiped his bloodied hands on his pants and looked at the woman with his handsome face.

"My goodness. How did you know? Could you tell? Did you think, 'He moves too well to be a mere bandit', or 'He's good at thinking on his feet'?" the man asked cheerfully. But the woman shook her head.

"I saw a wanted poster with your face on it in a country I visited half a year ago. If only I'd found you a bit closer to that country, I could have turned in your

head for the bounty."

"Oh..."

"My job this time was to wipe out these men. You can go wherever you like."

"Then I suppose that's it, then. No more playing bandit for me. Well, then..."
The man turned his back.

At that very moment, the woman said, "But you'll have to tell me where you put the money you stole from that country. I'll be taking it all."

The man looked up at the sky uncomfortably. He then turned on his heels and made the woman an offer.

"Could I at least keep half? After all, all labour deserves compensation."

"I want all of it."

"How about forty percent? I'm sure I have the right to at least that much..."

"I want all of it."

"Then thirty-five percent? I'm warning you, I'm not going any lower."

"I want all of it."

"Then let's settle for twenty percent..."

"I want all of it."

"I could help you carry it..."

"You're going to carry all of it."

"Nice weather today, don't you think?"

"Yes, it is."

"... Please...?"

"I want all of it."

The man fell into thought for a moment, eyes shut and arms crossed. He then finally opened his mouth again. "Please excuse me for being frank, but I just have to ask."

"Yes?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you are absolutely heartless?"

A lone car was driving down the mountain road.

It was a tiny and battered vehicle that was by no means clean.

The car sputtered along at a comfortable speed, with a full view of the valley where the bandits had once lived. It was almost sunset.

The woman driving the car happened across a lone man on the roadside, which should have been deserted.

He was a slightly short but handsome young man, standing with a simple bag and a rifle slung over his shoulder. The man stuck his arm out towards the car with his thumb in the air.

The car stopped in front of him. The man approached the car.

"Sorry, but think you could give me a ride? I don't have any transportation or money, but I'm not too bad with a persuader. Course, a certain someone has me beat."

The man gestured towards the hand persuader holstered at his left side. It was a .22 caliber hand persuader with a square barrel.

"My favorite toy. I just couldn't part with it. Oh! I can also carry your luggage." The man grinned.

"I don't need a partner," the woman replied coldly, driving onward. The man followed after the car and shouted.

"Also! I can fix your persuader! That revolver of yours! The barrel and cylinder are both in pretty rough shape! They don't work like they used to, right?!"

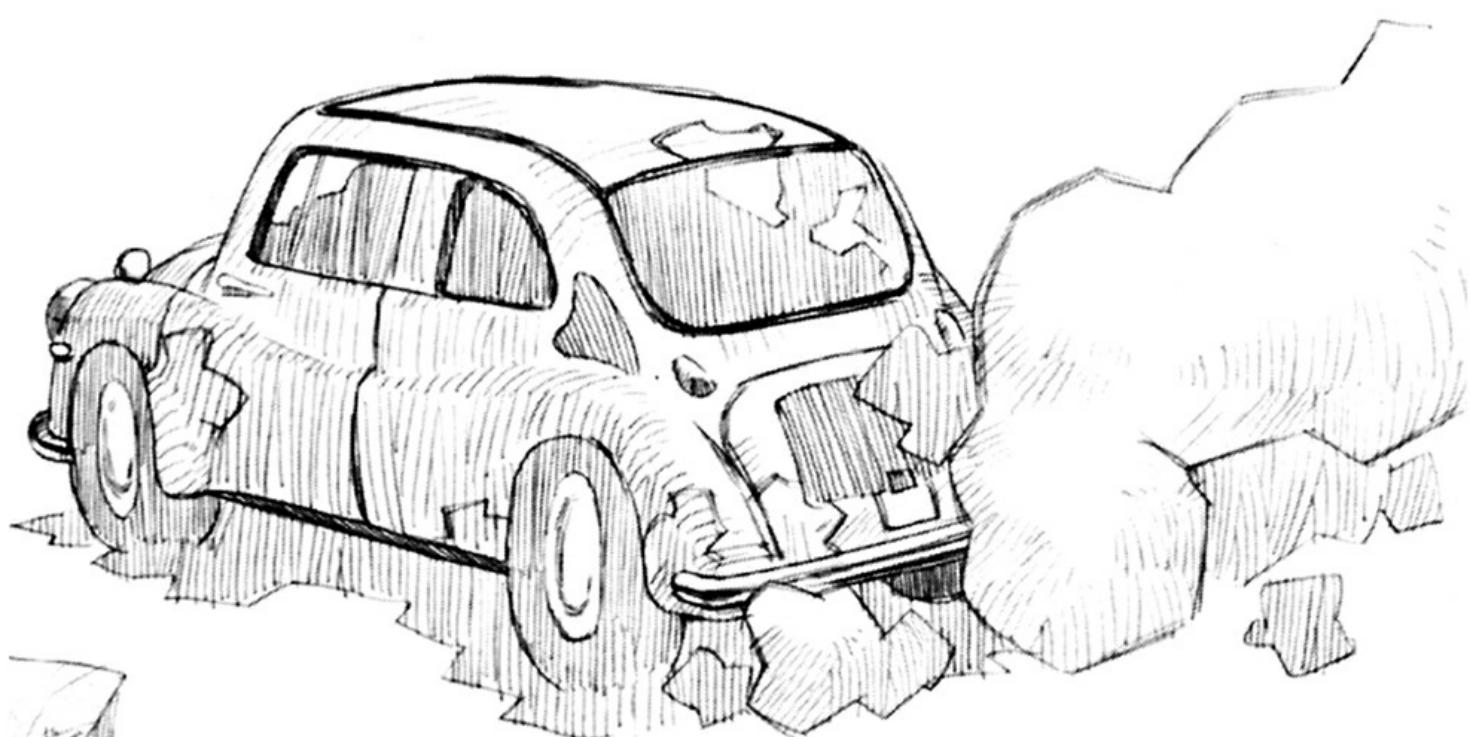
The car stopped after about twenty meters. The man soon caught up.

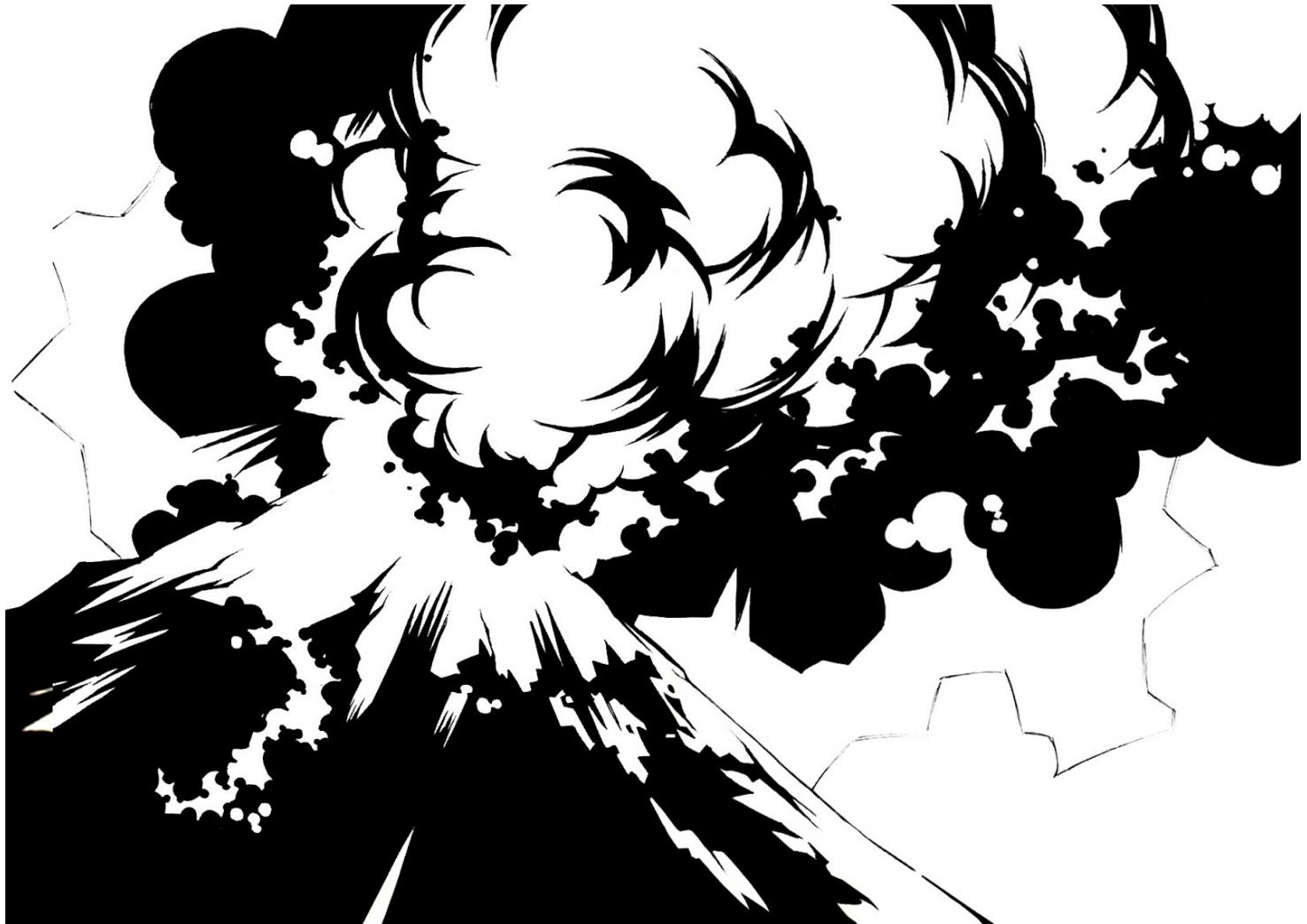
The woman got out of the driver's seat. "You drive?"

"Absolutely!"

The man energetically tossed his belongings into the back and took the driver's seat.

He waited for the woman to sit beside him and started the car.





Chapter 5: The Country that Never Forgets - Not Again-

The forest had burned down.

The mountain range was rippling with climbs and steep slopes, their trees burnt black and left to stand like charred pillars. The soil had hardened and was blanketed in ash and charcoal.

Grey clouds covered the sky, as if to match the landscape. Even in the light, it was hard to tell where the horizon was. Droplets of rain plopped to the ground on occasion.

A road snaked along the mountain range. It wound around up and down the mountainsides, and was just wide enough for a single car.

Traveling down the road was a motorrad.

It had a luggage rack in place of a back seat, loaded with a large suitcase. Compartments hung from either side of its rear wheel, and a rolled-up sleeping bag and a brown coat were secured to the top of the suitcase.

The rider was a young human in her mid-teens, wearing a black jacket and a thick belt. A holstered revolver was strapped to her right thigh. On her head was a hat with a bill and ear flaps, and a pair of goggles protected her eyes.

Cautiously, the rider navigated her way along the muddy road. When she happened across a large pothole, she stopped the motorrad and examined its depth before making it across in one go.

"Kino," the motorrad said.

Kino replied, "Yeah?"

"Do you remember how many countries we've visited so far?"

Kino shook her head. "No. What about you, Hermes?"

"Of course not. I was asking because I thought maybe you knew," replied Hermes.

"I remember some countries clearly," Kino said, "But I don't recall all the details. Maybe I should have kept a journal."

"Hm."

"People forget things that don't leave an impact, or things they don't really need to know. Who knows? Maybe I've forgotten that I've gone to some countries at all. But..."

"But?" asked Hermes.

"Some people think being able to forget is one of the good things about being human," Kino said, splashing through a shallow puddle.

"What's that mean?"

"That we can forget the painful things and move on with optimism. We're not held back by despair."

"I see."

"It really depends on the person, though. I think some things should be remembered."

"Like that time you turned so hard on the muddy road that your motorrad slipped and tipped over?" Hermes asked pointedly.

"Sorry."

Kino's left leg and arm, and the compartment on Hermes' left side were still caked with mud.

The winding road sank into a valley, stretching on in parallel with the stream at the base. The current was quick and muddy.

Kino and Hermes pressed on. Eventually they escaped the mountain range and found themselves at the crest of a gentle hill. Beyond was the country they were headed for.

The country in the hollow was surrounded by walls. The hollow was about the only flatland in the area, with the many streams from the mountains converging into it.

"Finally. That was a long trip," Hermes said.

Kino replied, "Yeah. All that riding in the mud sucked the energy out of me. I just want to spend the next three days resting. Maybe I'll just relax at the hotel for three days?"

"You might as well check out the country, though. And maybe go to a festival."

"If there is one, maybe."

Kino and Hermes made their way down the slope.

"Thank you for your patience. You're cleared to enter," said the gatekeeper at the guardhouse. "By the way, are you here for the events?"

"Events?" "Is something happening?" asked Kino and Hermes.

"You didn't know? Well, you're just in time for the Memorial Events. It starts today and runs until the day after tomorrow. It's an annual tradition we've been keeping since the great deluge seven years ago."

"There was a flood here?" Kino asked quickly.

The gatekeeper nodded. "Yes, a very big one. The biggest in our history, actually. An entire week of rain, causing chaos and confusion. We suffered many casualties, and countless buildings were demolished. The muddy water pooled for three days. Even after it drained, we had to contend with large-scale health and hygiene problems. We now commemorate the occasion to make sure we always remember the painful memories."

"I see."

"All citizens are required by law to participate in the proceedings," said the gatekeeper. "I hope you will decide to join in as well."

Kino pushed Hermes through the gates. Just inside the walls was a plaza.

"It must have started already."

The plaza was packed with onlookers. Someone was giving a speech.

"—and we survived the horrors of the deluge. It is with deepest gratitude that we live on peacefully today, bearing our memories of those we lost in that tragic flood. We now look to the future and take a bold new step—"

A podium stood under the cloudy sky, and a man was passionately orating into the microphone. Several VIPs sat behind him on the stage.

“Our country will never forget. We hereby pledge to remember the past as we live on—”

Kino pushed Hermes forward, slowly approaching the event.

“—and now, it is with great joy that I announce the end of the ceremonies taking place at the East Gate this morning. Thank you for your time!”

Everyone held a moment of silence.

Afterwards, the crowd began to disperse. One of the people spotted Kino.

He introduced himself and explained that the event was commemorating the great flood, and that the flood was great indeed. Kino and Hermes had heard most of it from the gatekeeper already, but this explanation went on even longer.

“Look, Traveler,” said another local, pointing at a mark on the country’s gate. It was much higher up than a person was tall. “That’s how high the water rose during the peak of the flood. Isn’t it scary?”

A narrow stream ran next to the plaza. The streams were channeled into waterways that ran through the walls, running directly into the country.

“That tiny stream became a raging river. The rain wouldn’t stop, and the water just kept on coming... There was nothing we could do.”

Kino scrutinized the stream and the waterway.

“Did you see the mark on the gate?” asked another local. Kino cringed for half a second, but she smiled and shook her head.

The country was completely flat.

Farms were laid out in orderly sections, and wooden single-story houses lined the streets. The shallow streams ran parallel to the roads and were used as irrigation canals. Kino spotted haphazard mud levees, and small yellow flowers in brilliant bloom on the roadside.

Kino and Hermes made their way to the center of the country at a relaxed

pace. They spotted a hotel in an area with larger buildings, and stepped inside.

Once they were led into a room, Kino propped up Hermes and unloaded her things.

Then Kino went up to the rooftop on the second floor, where she could see the country's walls beyond the few high-rises in the area, and the mountains surrounding the hollow. Downstream to the west were green peaks, and upstream to the east were brown burnt-out hills.

She looked up. The sky was still covered in a thick blanket of clouds.

"I'll go take a nap."

Kino returned to find a bellboy waiting at her door. "I've been looking for you, Miss Kino. We're actually on our way to the afternoon events, so I regret to inform you that lunch will not be served at the hotel today. But if you have the time, I suggest you attend today's proceedings. Food will be served free of charge, with unlimited refills."

Kino went into her room. "Which is why we're going, Hermes."

"Wait, what?"

Near the hotel, at the center of the country, was a large park. It was covered with grass, with pathways and trees forming ponds that dotted the landscape.

In the middle of the park was a large concrete platform topped with a statue of people aboard a small boat. It was a monument commemorating the flood, surrounded by lit candles.

In front of the monument was a stage—slightly larger than the one at the East Gate—with a podium equipped with a microphone, next to which were multiple large tents. Banners reading 'Never Forget' were hung up all around the park.

The crowds had already gathered. The chairs were all taken, leaving standing room only. Stands sold food and drinks to onlookers, and people were rushing around to make preparations.

"They look like they're enjoying themselves. You sure this isn't a festival?" Hermes wondered.

Soon, a band marched up next to the stage with their instruments and took

their seats. Then a group of well-dressed people stepped up—men and women, young and old.

After a brief microphone test, the emcee came up to the podium and gave a lengthy introduction. The event began.

First, everyone held a moment of silence.

Then came the speeches from the VIPs.

Then the emcee praised the firefighters who bravely undertook rescue work during the flood—the people sitting in the front row.

Then the emcee introduced everyone on stage. They took turns giving speeches of their own.

A middle-aged woman who lifted the spirits of everyone at the shelter. A man who lost his job but never stopped encouraging others in his position. A teacher who replanted trees along the roads with the help of her students.

“Wake me up when it’s over,” Hermes mumbled as the event went on, and said no more.

The final speech was from a young girl who was orphaned in the flood. She read out a letter addressed to him, assuring her late father that the people around her were giving her all the help she needed, and that she would stay strong for him. Audience members broke down crying.

“Here, Traveler,” someone said, handing Kino a set of lyrics.

“We will now close the proceedings with the Requiem, to remember the past and to bring peace to the souls who were lost in the flood,” said the emcee.

A conductor came forward, bowed to the audience, and turned to the band. The music began.

A chorus started singing first, and the people followed.

Kino looked at the lyrics.

Requiem: Never Forget

One quiet spring day

One still spring day

Droplets turned to streams and spilled upon the earth

One day turned to nine and swallowed the land

O, how cruel is fate

Rain, ten days and nights

Our beloved home

**Set upon by torrents (by torrents)*

Set upon by torrents (by torrents)

O, how cruel is fate

Land turned to sea, homes turned to islands

Peaceful tables pulled into mud

Plates left afloat, elders dragged down

Homes were lost, rest was lost

Lives uncountable were lost

As were our foundations

**Repeat*

And so

Our unity was tested (tested)

Our courage was tested (tested)

Drained rivers turned to streams

Mounds of mud turned to soil

But never will our memories fade

And so

We turn our voices to the heavens

We will never forget that day

We will never forget (never forget)

We will never forget (never forget)

Never forget that day

The song ended with a round of applause, closing the curtains on the proceedings at the park.

Some left immediately, and others stayed to chat with family and friends. But most people lined up at the tents for lunch.

Kino smacked Hermes awake and got in line. She was informed that during and after the flood, the locals were reduced to eating rations provided by the government. The tents were a sort of reenactment of the past.

“We don’t want to forget, after all.”

After a long wait, Kino finally got her food. Two rice balls, and a bowl of meat-and-vegetable soup. She sat down next to Hermes and dug in.

“Now what?” Hermes said once she was done.

“I think we’ve seen enough of the events,” Kino said. “Let’s go and resupply.”

They left the park and headed to a nearby shopping district.. The streets were packed with people on their way home.

Kino spotted a clothing store and asked the owner, “Do you have any white shirts in stock?”

“Actually—”

The owner held up a shirt with the words ‘7 YEARS LATER: PROUD SURVIVOR’ on the back. A stylized flooded house was embroidered over the left breast.

Kino was lost for words.

“It’s a little pricier than your average shirt, but it’ll be a wonderful souvenir for your travels. Check out some of our other merchandise—”

The owner presented a children’s shirt labeled ‘NOW TALLER THAN THE MARK IN THE COUNTRY CENTER’, a hat with the words ‘A STORY TO TELL THE GRANDKIDS: THE DELUGE’, and a coat with a map of the city, which marked the water levels from the flood.

“Do you have anything...normal in stock?” asked Kino.

“Not right now. We only stock merchandise that sells well at this time of the

year."

Kino and Hermes gave up on getting shirts and headed to a hardware store for a new knife. The owner could only offer one engraved with the words '7 YEARS—SPRING AGAIN'.

She tried to buy a new sharpening stone, but the store only sold commemorative editions that came in special cases. Kino asked for the price and was baffled.

"...I see this must be a premium product. Is it a limited run?"

"No, no. It's just a souvenir. Isn't the case great?"

"Couldn't I just buy the stone without the case for the regular price?"

"I'm afraid not. This is the only thing we have in stock until the day after tomorrow. Everyone's crazy about the anniversary products because we only sell them this time of the year."

"I see."

In the end, Kino left the hardware store empty-handed. She headed for a persuader store.

When she asked for ammunition, the owner turned to the back room.

"Hey, have we got any anniversary rounds for hand persuaders? The .44 caliber enamel points?"

Someone at the back answered.

"Sorry, traveler, we only have the regular kind today," the owner said apologetically.

By the time they returned to the hotel, it was raining. Droplets of water drummed against the rooftop.

"That was close. Almost got soaked," said Hermes.

Kino looked out the window. "It's really pouring today," she said to a nearby employee.

"Yes, but it's nothing unusual this time of year. We had a bit of a dry spell earlier, so everyone's looking forward to the streams filling up again. And don't

worry, it's not nearly enough rain for flooding or avalanches."

"Of course."

Kino went back to her room.

"What's wrong?" asked Hermes, "You've been going quiet a lot since yesterday."

"I'm trying to remember," Kino said.

"Huh?"

"I think I'm forgetting something."

"Like what?"

Kino furrowed her brow. "I wonder."

The next morning.

Kino woke up and looked out the window. It was still raining, and still dark even though dawn had come.

After taking apart and doing maintenance on Cannon, Kino cleaned it and did marksmanship drills.

Even at breakfast, the sky remained dark and the rain showed no sign of slowing.

When she returned to her room, Hermes said, "You should take the day off and relax."

"Maybe."

Kino did basic maintenance on Hermes and checked her belongings. Then she sharpened some of her knives with her old sharpening stone.

Even then, the rain continued. Kino turned on the radio.

"It has been seven years since the historic deluge. We will be live at the Central Stadium this afternoon to bring you full coverage of the events. We must never forget the—"

Kino fell into thought again.

"Did you remember?"

Kino shook her head. “It’s no good. For now...”

“For now?”

Kino rose. “I’m going to ask if I can have lunch at the hotel today.” Then she stepped outside.

Hotel employees were supplied with commemorative rations, which Kino also received. That was when she heard the weather forecast, which predicted rain into the next day.

“Good thing, too. The forests catch fire at the slightest spark in the winter because it gets so dry.”

“I see.”

Kino turned to go back to her room, when she suddenly looked back at the employee in shock.

“When was the most recent forest fire?”

“Hm? About a month ago. We think it must have been a lightning strike—the blaze lasted for days. But it was very beautiful at night. There hasn’t been a fire so close to the country before, so some people even suggested holding anniversary events for it, too.”

Kino quietly nodded again and again. “I see...”

“Hermes!”

As soon as she was back in her room, Kino stuffed the dry bread and canned sausages from the rations into her bag.

“Wh-what is it?”

“We’re leaving, now.”

Kino loaded her things onto Hermes, covered it all up with a waterproof canvas, and secured it tightly with rope.

“What?”

Kino picked up her coat, hat, and goggles. She tightly fastened her belt and checked Cannon one more time.

"We might be in for another flood. We have to get out of here now."

"What? But they said it was normal to get this much rain. Aren't you overreacting?" asked Hermes.

"I just remembered," Kino replied.

"Oh! What was it?"

"Back when we lived with Master, a lumberjack told me that a burnt-out forest can't function anymore. That you should never stay downstream from a burnt-out valley. It's because the forest can't absorb water. So after a big fire, the streams dry out for a little while. But they'll overflow their banks after rainfall. I can't believe it took me this long to remember. I'm getting a bad feeling about this. Do you understand now, Hermes? We have to go."

"I'm fine with that, but what about your weird three-day rule?"

"It won't be much of a rule if no one's around to keep it."

"True. So survival—"

"You mean, 'survival comes first'. Let's go."

Hermes lost his chance to finish.

Kino checked out of the hotel without explaining why.

Then she put on her hat and goggles, fastened the edges of her coat, wrapped a bandanna over her face, and rode through the rain.

As the storm continued, she raced towards the West Gate.

Even after leaving the walls, Kino continued without stopping until she reached the western edge of the hollow, making her way through the muddy roads.

The road soon diverged from the river and went uphill again.

"That should be good enough. We should stay away from slopes, too."

Just as the road headed into a valley in the mountains, Kino climbed up a low hill and stopped Hermes under a large tree far from the road. She set up a temporary tent with the waterproof canvas and ropes, flattened out the grass, and then put up her single-person tent. She pushed Hermes next to it.

Kino hung up her soaked hat and goggles on Hermes. She wrung out her bandanna and wiped Hermes' tank, and hung it on his handlebar.

Then Kino leaned against the tree and began eating the rations she received. Droplets of water fell from the branches on occasion, soaking into her coat and wetting her back.

"I hate rain."

"Too bad. You could have been snug under a proper roof if you'd stayed. With white sheets and a warm shower, too."

"Yeah."

After lunch, Kino relaxed and looked around.

A dense mist obscured everything in the distance. Once in a while, large droplets of water hit the waterproof sheet overhead.

The rain continued into night. It knew no stopping.

The next morning, Kino rose at dawn.

The rain had stopped. Kino put on her jacket and held Cannon in her right hand as she crawled out of her tent.

"Good morning, Kino. You slept like a rock," said Hermes.

Kino stretched. "Yeah. I really did."

She cast her gaze at the world under the morning sun.

To the east was the hollow, and the round walls around the country. Inside, it looked like a gigantic muddy pond.

The world grew brighter and brighter, and the sun emerged completely. The country came into clear view. The rivers running from the mountains in the east had flooded, as had the streams in the country. The large buildings at the center seemed almost to be floating, while many of the houses were reduced to roofs.

"That's a big one. You think it broke any records?"

"I knew it..." Kino muttered sadly. "They didn't replace the gate since the previous flood, so I started to wonder. They kept all the canals and low levees exactly the same, too."

"Maybe it's reminding them of the flood from seven years ago. Or maybe helping them forget. Which do you think?"

"I don't know."

With the moist forest air around her, Kino took down the tent and the waterproof canvas.

She had her usual rations for breakfast, loaded her things, and started Hermes.

"Let's get going," Kino said, looking up at the green mountains, "This way should be all right."

"Okay."

They set off again.

On the seventh turn on their way west on the muddy road, Kino slipped and tipped over.

"Hey!" Hermes complained, "I told you not to turn that hard in the mud. There's not enough friction!"

"Sorry, Hermes."

"Never mind. Stand me back up."

"There."

Kino pushed him up. Her left leg and arm, and the compartment on Hermes' left side were caked with mud.

"How many times do I have to remind you? Did you forget already?"

"No," Kino said, shaking her head and wiping away the mud with tree branches and leaves. "I thought maybe I could pull it off this time."

"Sure, sure."

Kino started Hermes again.

"It's all right," she said.

"What is?"

"I think I can do it next time."

“Stop.”

“I can make it.”

“I told you not to do it.”

“I’ve got the hang of it now. I’ll make it.”

“Please don’t.”

“I can just focus on the front wheel.”

“No.”

“All I have to do is turn in the other direction and—”

“No.”

The motorrad continued making its way through the verdant forest.





Chapter 6: The Safe Country -For His Safety-

A road ran along the lakeshore.

So large was the lake that the opposite shore was out of sight. The wind sent small waves rippling towards the gravel beaches. A little further inland was the dirt-paved road, which went on seemingly without end.

Trees reached high up into the air, densely packed together and lit by the morning sun. The snow had melted completely.

The road crossed several rivers that flowed into the lake.

In the woods, a short distance from one such crossing, was a motorrad. And a person, standing next to it.

She was in her mid-teens, with short black hair, large eyes, and fair features. She wore a black jacket and a thick belt with pouches. Hand persuaders were holstered on her thigh and back--a revolver and a slender automatic model respectively.

She drew the revolver and fired it from waist-level. There was a deafening noise and a puff of white smoke—the shot had hit a metal plate hanging from a tree a slight distance away. Birds took into the air.

“Perfect,” said the motorrad.

The human smiled. This time, she brought up her arm and fired off five more rounds. Each shot struck the metal plate.

“Still as good as ever, Kino,” said the motorrad.

Kino replied, “Thanks.”

“Anyway, can we get going now?”

“One minute,” Kino said, taking apart her persuader and replacing the empty cylinder. Then she put it back and holstered it.

Going up to the metal plate, Kino pulled it off the tree and hung it on another branch many times further away. Then she returned to the motorrad, and

unholstered the persuader secured behind her back.

Kino expertly disarmed the safety and took aim.

"I'm counting on you, Hermes."

"Yeah," Hermes replied.

Kino opened fire. There was a quieter gunshot, and a small casing leapt into the air.

"Perfect. That was a bull's eye," said Hermes.

Kino pulled the trigger again.

"A hit. Slightly to the lower left."

Each time Kino fired, Hermes told her where the bullet had struck.

Two magazines' worth of shots later, Kino loaded a third magazine into the persuader and armed the safety. Then she holstered it and went to retrieve the metal plate.

"Good job, Kino. Even Master couldn't scold you for this performance," Hermes said when she returned.

"Thanks," Kino replied. "That's all for today."

Kino took out her earplugs and put them into her pocket. Then she picked up the scattered casings and started Hermes. The roar of his engine resounded across the lake.

As for the metal plate, Kino put it in the suitcase lying next to Hermes. She put the suitcase on his luggage rack and secured it tightly with an elastic strap.

"By the way, Kino? Is the next country really that dangerous? You've been practicing nonstop since yesterday," Hermes wondered.

"Hm? I don't know," Kino replied, hands still busy at work.

"What?"

"I really don't know what to expect. I couldn't find a lot of information about that country. But it's never a bad idea to be prepared. We could end up like in that other country if we're not careful. ...All right, let's go."

Once Hermes was fully loaded, Kino looked around to make sure she hadn't left anything behind.

She put on her long brown coat and wrapped the ends over her thighs. She also put on her hat and goggles.

When she climbed atop Hermes and leaned forward, the stand came sliding up automatically.

They finally went back on the road. Leaving the forest, Kino and Hermes traveled with the sun behind them.

It was afternoon when they reached the country on the lakeshore.

"Good day, Traveler. Welcome to our country," said the immigrations officer at the window by the gates.

"Hello. My name is Kino, and this here is Hermes. I'd like to request a three-day stay for tourism purposes."

The officer's gaze fell on Hermes. "Er...do you mean to include your motorrad as well?"

"Of course," Hermes said. Kino nodded.

The officer thought for a moment before responding. "I don't mean any offense, but...I'm afraid I cannot allow Hermes to enter the country unless I receive a written declaration from you swearing that you will not turn on his engine while in our country. Riding a motorrad is forbidden by law here."

"Really?"

"What? Then how do you get around?" Hermes asked from behind.

"Our country provides an automated public transit service, free of charge. Think of them as cars that you can order around. They'll take you wherever you would like to go, and are large enough to easily fit Hermes as well," the officer explained apologetically.

Kino briefly fell into thought and answered, "I understand. I promise not to ride my motorrad during my stay."

"Kino?!"

"We don't have a choice, Hermes. When in another country, do as the locals do."

Hermes begrudgingly agreed. "All right. I guess it's better than that weird country where you had to put on that funny outfit to go inside."

"Don't remind me," Kino mumbled.

"Thank you," said the officer. "Now if you'll give us a written declaration."

He handed Kino a form and a writing utensil—a slender brush. She was taken aback.

"We use brushes for writing in our country. Here is the ink."

"Right."

Kino wrote, 'I will not ride Hermes while in this country' on the form and signed it. The officer read it over.

"Thank you, Kino. We'll begin preparations for opening the gates shortly. By the way, you wouldn't happen to be in possession of any persuaders, would you?"

"I am," Kino said, unholstering Cannon and holding it by the barrel, with the grip pointed upwards.

The officer leapt out of his chair and scrambled to the corner of the room. He dove behind a locker, trembling. "I-I'm terribly sorry, but p-persuaders are not permitted here."

"What?"

"The law forbids civilians from possessing persuaders. Only members of the national defense forces may use them. I'm terribly sorry, but I cannot grant you permission for entry while armed. Please try to understand," he said from behind the locker, sounding even more apologetic.

"So that's how it is, Kino," said Hermes. "What're you gonna do?"

"This is a bit of a pickle. I have to go in there unarmed?" Kino mumbled, looking down at Cannon.

"Do as the locals do...the locals...the locals..." Hermes echoed.

"Fine," Kino grumbled, and showed Cannon to the officer. "I understand. What would you like me to do? I have another persuader here with me—will you be taking them into custody until I leave?"

"N-no, I don't need it, thank you very much! I, er...pardon my manners. I'm afraid of persuaders, you see. Agh! Please don't show it to me!" the officer shrieked, taking cover.

In the end, Kino had to completely take apart her persuaders and place them in a safe prepared by the officer. He ensured her that the safe would be taken to the western gates before her departure.

It took the officer a long time to write up the forms. "Thank you for the wait. Now let me open those gates for you... Ah! By the way, would you happen to have any blades in your possession? The law forbids civilians from possessing them."

Without even blinking, Kino nodded. "Yes. I have many. I'm sorry, but could you give me a list of everything that is forbidden in this country?"

"Finally," Kino grumbled, pushing Hermes through the gates.

"I'm tired," Hermes agreed.

Kino had submitted all her knives into the officer's custody and filled out the forms. He went on to explain what else was illegal—sharp implements, and for some reason, the rope Kino used for her tent. She left it all with him.

The country was lit by the glow of the setting sun.

The lands were vast, lined with many low buildings in orderly rows. The wide roads were paved to perfection and well-maintained. Not many people were out and about because it was evening.

Kino took off her coat and hung it on top of her luggage. She glanced at the empty holster on her thigh.

"Looks like I've managed to lose weight. Now, then..."

She looked out at the road. A vehicle came gliding in complete silence, stopping in front of Kino and Hermes. It was equipped with several seats, but no one was inside.

"Please board the vehicle," said a voice from inside, and the door slid open. Some of the seats folded in and formed a flat freight bed. The chassis descended so that the floor was almost level with the road.

"This must be one of those self-driving things," said Hermes. Other similar vehicles were gliding along the roads.

"Yeah," Kino mumbled, loading Hermes onto the vehicle. She took a seat in one of the chairs.

"Please state your destination," said the vehicle.

Kino asked for a hotel and gave a detailed list of conditions.

"Understood," the vehicle said, and it was off. Slowly, at about a person's running pace.

"I see," said Hermes, "I don't need to move here at all."

Kino leaned back. "This is so comfortable."

When they finally reached the hotel that matched all of Kino's conditions, they were welcomed inside and led into their room.

The room was large, but almost alien in structure. The furniture was all very close to the ground. Everything from the bed to the dresser to the sink and the desk was no more than knee-height. The bathroom had no tub.

"I'd love to do some sightseeing, but I need to get some rest for today," Kino said. She ate dinner, showered, and went to bed.

The next morning, Kino rose at dawn. The weather was pleasant.

She began with light warm-up exercises and looked for her persuaders, but remembered that she had left them with the officer at the gates.

So Kino ended up doing more hand-to-hand combat practice than usual.

A little while after breakfast, she woke Hermes.

Kino put on her jacket and pushed Hermes outside. She rolled up her coat and tied it to Hermes' luggage rack.

Outside, they spotted several people in a line. Someone explained that locals occasionally had to wait in line for vehicles during rush hour.

Kino pushed Hermes to the back of one of the lines. In front of them was a woman in her late twenties.

"Hello. Are you a traveler?"

"Yes. Good morning," Kino said.

The woman pointed at Kino's right thigh. "Is that a holster for a persuader? I've seen it in the movies."

"Yes, that's right. But I've left my persuaders at the gates."

The woman's expression darkened. "You own persuaders."

"I do." Kino nodded.

The woman's expression darkened even more. She said slowly, "In our country, it's illegal for civilians to own persuaders."

"I've been informed, yes."

"Do you know why?" asked the woman.

"I don't know anything about your history, so I can't say I do."

The woman shook her head firmly. "It has nothing to do with history. We forbid persuader ownership because persuaders are very dangerous."

Kino glanced at Hermes, then looked back at the woman. "I see."

"That's right," the woman said. "Persuaders exist to harm people and animals. So owning one makes you want to shoot other people. To hurt others. If everyone had persuaders of their own, they would eventually develop the urge to shoot. Persuader crimes would run rampant. Our peaceful, harmonious lives would be shattered. Which is why they're such dangerous things. The more persuaders there are in the world, the more our lives are threatened. That's why we ban persuader possession. Persuaders shouldn't exist at all."

Kino listened, making sure to nod on occasion. Then she said, "I need a persuader because I sometimes find myself in dangerous situations on the road."

The woman did not seem convinced. "And when that happens, you'll open fire. And if the other person has a persuader too, you'll shoot at one another

until someone is dead. But if you don't have a persuader, they won't kill you, either. You'll have a chance for peaceful dialogue, for a chance to find a solution without resorting to violence."

"I wonder," Kino said soullessly.

The woman continued, "I don't know what brought you here, but maybe it was fate. Take this chance to learn about how we make everything safe for people in our country. Goodbye."

Watching the woman leave, Kino said indifferently, "Of course."

Once she had caught a vehicle, Kino ordered it to take her to the center of the country. The words 'TO COUNTRY CENTER' appeared at the front.

The vehicle moved at a leisurely pace. When it hit an intersection, it came to a full stop and only passed through once the vehicles that had come earlier had had their turn. The vehicle also maintained a consistent distance from the others on the road.

"This is so slow. I'm falling asleep," Hermes mumbled.

That was when they stopped. "Please make room for fellow passengers," said the vehicle.

A man waiting in line stepped inside.

"Ah, a traveler. It's nice to meet you. We almost never get outlanders in these parts," he said, sitting across from Kino.

"Hello."

"What do you think of our automated public transit service?"

"It's very comfortable," Kino said.

The man nodded proudly. "Isn't it? It's one of our country's finest achievements. Everyone can get where they want efficiently, safely, and comfortably. I can't imagine life without this system, especially considering how large this country is."

"Do people ever drive these vehicles?" Kino asked without thinking. The man furrowed his brow.

"Drive? Did you just say 'drive'? As in, do we operate these vehicles ourselves?"

"Yes. I was wondering if people wouldn't want to take themselves to their destinations," Kino replied.

The man paled. "That's much too dangerous! People driving vehicles...it's absurd! It's a recipe for disaster."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. A vehicle is essentially a large, heavy object that can be moved at high speeds. Sometimes with the same level of energy as a persuader shot. We all know what would happen if one of these things barreled into a person."

"I suppose so."

"People are not perfect. We make mistakes. Certainly not intentionally, but we make bad judgements all the same. That includes when we are operating vehicles. If we allow people to drive, someone, somewhere, is bound to get into an accident. They could damage property, hurt people, or even cause death. This is why our country does not permit civilians to operate vehicles. Driving is a barbaric act from a bygone era, when cars were first invented. We now have automated vehicles that take us safely to our destinations, so why would any sane person think about driving at all? Ah, I didn't mean any offense. But really, *driving?*"

The vehicle came to a stop. The man rose from his seat.

"Please don't even think about operating something like this, Traveler," the man warned, and left. At the same time, an elderly man stepped inside and sat across from Kino.

When the vehicle began moving again, the old man gazed out the window and muttered to himself.

"Ah, it's been a long time since I last heard someone say 'driving'. Back in the day, I'd use a steering wheel and step on a pedal to accelerate. But those were dark times, yes. Horrific crashes every day. My dear uncle was run down while crossing the street. Died the next day, still young, with a wife and children left behind. And there was that young driver who decided he could speed a little

more than usual and missed his turn. Hit tiny kindergarten children standing in a line. A distracted truck driver crashing into the car in front of him. One tragedy after another, day after day. All the rules in the world can't stop people from making mistakes. And don't get me started on the non-mistakes. The bad apples. One criminal takes off in a car, and suddenly everything on that strip of road is in danger."

"I see," Kino said indifferently.

"Cars are killing machines. Weapons. Certainly not for us to drive around. Thank heavens for machines—now we can get around comfortably and safely. This is what cars were supposed to be, when people first thought them up. Who knew I'd live to see the day?"

The old man's eyes never once left the distance as he spoke.

The entire country was dotted with low buildings. The roads never once stopped being perfect.

"There's nothing interesting around. All these buildings are boring," Hermes complained.

"Where to next?" Kino wondered, pushing Hermes off the vehicle.

"Hold it!" someone said from behind. It was a shrill female voice.

Kino turned. A plump, middle-aged woman was sprinting towards her. To Kino's relief, she stopped just short of crashing into her.

"I thought I was a goner," Hermes whispered.

"Are you traveling on this?" the woman demanded, pointing an accusing finger at Hermes.

"Yes, but I've signed a—" "Do *not!* I swear, you are going to die on this thing!"

"I—" "Motorrads are dangerous! Think about it, where is the protection? If you happen to slip and fall, you'll get thrown clear off! There's nothing to keep you secure!"

"That's—" "Your life is precious! It's valuable! So stop this foolishness immediately! You're too young to die. Just think about how your parents would feel!"

"I understand, but my—" "There! So do try and think more about your safety! I hope being here gives you lots to think about. Good day!"

The woman took off in the blink of an eye and disappeared on her vehicle.

A moment later, Hermes said, "I take it back. It's not as boring as I thought here."

Kino nodded. "Let's do some shopping."

They got back in their vehicle and headed for the shopping district. There they found a large mall, with a pathway down the middle lined by shops. Kino pushed Hermes along.

Spotting a hardware store nearby, Kino stepped inside. Pots were on display on the low, wide shelves. The employee, who was working on the floor, looked up.

"Welcome! You must be a traveler. Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Yes. Do you have any knives in stock? I'm looking for one with a blade longer than my palm, double-edged and sharp. I've been looking for ages."

"Pardon me?" asked the employee. "What do you... Ah, I suppose you must not know. You see, possession of blades is forbidden by law here."

"What? You mean there are no knives here? Not even in other stores?" Hermes asked, pretending to be shocked.

"No. There is a blanket ban on blades in our country."

"Why?" Kino asked.

The employee replied, "Because blades are dangerous."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Knives are tools for cutting and hurting people. Anyone who would want one has no respect for the sanctity of human life. A potential murderer. We must keep knives out of the hands of anyone who could use them to hurt others. A society where the average civilian has access to knives is no society at all. Just thinking of the perfect knife control laws in our country

brings tears of pride to my eyes!" the employee said, eyes watering.

"What if you need to sharpen a pencil?" Kino wondered.

"We have machines for that," the employee answered immediately.

"What about for crafts? Or cooking?" Kino asked.

"All crafting and cooking materials are processed to perfection before reaching the shelves. This is a civilized city. We have highly-trained professionals like butchers, who wield knives for us. Knives are their tools of the trade, but even these people only use blades for work. Outside work hours, they store their knives in safe lockers. Just thinking about putting a knife in a civilian's hands gives me the chills. Just suppose..."

Kino and Hermes waited for the employee to continue.

"Imagine there was a country where anyone could get their hands on a knife. There would be stabbings and slashings day and night! People driven into a corner in life, reduced to a frothing rage and rushing into the streets with a knife from the store, stabbing anyone who happens to be there! Who could live in a country like that? It's the stuff of nightmares..."

"I see. Thank you for the information. If you'll excuse us."

"Bye."

Kino and Hermes left the employee to tremble with his head in his hands.

As they walked through the quiet shopping district, Kino mumbled, "I'm amazed."

"I can see his point," Hermes admitted. "Someone crazy tried to kill you with a kitchen knife before. And it's true that knives are dangerous. There's a reason they have the saying 'like a hot knife through margarine'."

"...You mean butter?"

"Yeah, that."

Hermes fell silent.

Then he said, "Now what?"

"Let's at least stock up on the bare essentials," Kino said, looking around.

"Didn't you say the strap on your bag came off?"

"Right. I should look for heavy-duty adhesives."

Kino asked a passerby for directions to a general store.

Inside the store, they found yet more low shelves. And a middle-aged manager.

"Good day. You're a traveler, I see. Welcome. Can I help you find anything?"

"Hello. I'm looking for some heavy-duty adhesives."

The manager seemed a little surprised at first, but replied, "I'm afraid not. You won't find them anywhere."

"What?" Hermes said. The manager held up his index finger.

"Allow me to explain. In our country, it is forbidden by law for a civilian to possess or use a heavy-duty adhesive."

"...Why is that?" Kino asked. Hermes quietly whispered, "We already know the answer."

"Because they're dangerous, of course. What if you end up sticking your fingers together? If it gets into your eyes? If a child were to swallow some? It would be a disaster. It's only right to regulate material that can put people's lives in jeopardy. If you need something fixed, I can offer you this instead."

The manager held out a colorful glue stick. Kino took it and examined it.

"How long does it take to dry?"

"Not long. Only half a day or so."

Kino put the glue stick back on the shelf. "I think the glue can wait. What about strong thread and some needles for repairing leather?"

The manager replied, "We do carry thin thread. Although anything over 10 Pull Resistance is forbidden by law."

"What is 10 Pull Resistance?" Kino asked.

"It means that the thread will not break for three seconds after bearing the weight of this country's average 10-year-old."

"Why is anything stronger illegal?" asked Hermes.

"Naturally, to prevent hangings and strangulation. Strong thread can be used as weapons."

Kino said nothing. Hermes said, "So you don't sell rope, either."

"You'll find the threads on that yellow shelf over there. We don't stock any needles, however. It's forbidden by law for civilians to possess them."

Kino nodded. "Because they could prick themselves, correct? And broken needle ends could enter the bloodstream and injure the lungs."

"Precisely. There is a blanket ban on needles and other sharp implements. Like compass tips, ballpoint pens, and fountain pens. As for pencils, anything with a tip measuring more than 120 degrees is against the law."

Kino was silent.

"But we do have needles for sewing machines, which can only be removed by licensed professionals. You'll need a sewing machine license and an ID card bearing your current address, and a criminal record check, which will take two weeks to process. Afterwards, you must take the needle to the nearest police station to register the manufacturing number."

"That's a lot of work," Hermes said, exasperated.

"All for the public's safety," the manager said proudly.

Kino asked, "So sewing machines aren't illegal?"

"Not at all. Anyone can obtain a license. You just need a doctor's note testifying that you are medically fit to operate a sewing machine, and a clear criminal record check. Then you take the documents to the nearest police station for a written test, then take a sewing machine education course and a practical examination. Then you can receive a sewing machine purchase permit. If you bring the permit to the store, you will be allowed to purchase a sewing machine. Afterwards, you must bring the machine to the police station to register it. You also need a locker and a key for storing the sewing machine in your residence. The locker must be securely bolted down to the residence. If you are living with family, you must also receive doctor's notes and criminal

record checks for them as well. Then you are cleared to use a sewing machine at home. You will be free to make dishcloths, skirts, children's clothing, whatever your heart desires. Of course, you must renew your registration once a year—the police come to check that your sewing machine has not been illegally modified to make the needle removable. We have textbooks to help you prepare for the written exam, if you'd like."

The manager picked up a dictionary-sized book from one of the shelves.

Kino sighed. "No thank you. ...Please excuse us."

After lunch, Kino headed to a park by the lake. The sun was at its peak, and the waters were a clear blue. Long clouds floated by over the horizon.

Kino stopped Hermes on the grass. She got off to sit down—

"Hello, Traveler. How do you like our lake?" someone said from behind.

Kino turned. It was a man who had been taking a walk by the shore. He was about thirty years of age and wearing a lab coat.

"Hello. The view is wonderful," Kino said.

The man chuckled. "Isn't it? It's part of the reason our ancestors chose to settle here. The beaches get packed with people in the summer."

"I see. It must be hard to swim in the lake with so many people," Kino remarked.

The man's expression darkened. He took two steps towards Kino. "Swimming? Not a chance. It's forbidden by law," he said coldly.

"Really?"

"That's right. Do you have any idea how dangerous water can be? People have drowned in shin-high water."

"But swimming is fun."

The man exhaled loudly. He put a finger to his temple and shook his head. "Fun? ...Look, there's no sense in risking your life for a moment of entertainment. You're underestimating the dangers of water. In any case, our country has a blanket ban on civilian swimming, whether in rivers or the lake."

Maybe you'll wise up once you're older. Go ahead and swim, for all I care. It's your life, not mine."

"Right," Kino replied soullessly yet again. "By the way! Is that why there aren't any bathtubs here?"

"That's right. You can get special permission for tubs for babies and very young children, but any bathtubs and large containers that can hold water are illegal. Don't want any children or elders drowning. I've heard of countries that make those death traps mandatory. If they could see our country, they'd see sense. They'd see what it's like living in real civilization."

"I see."

"You're lucky to have seen all this, Traveler. When you return to your homeland, tell them about all the great things our country is doing. And don't be shy about it. I'm sure you'll surprise them all. But don't go on the motorrad; you might kill yourself on the way. Goodbye."

Once the man was gone, Hermes asked, "What do you want to do now? Go back to the hotel?"

"Maybe I'll take a nap here."

"Isn't it a bit cold for that? You'll get sick."

"Really? I guess naps are more dangerous than I thought."

The hotel lobby was furnished with low shelves and sofas.

A round fishbowl was fixed to the shelf. Inside were several goldfish, some with red and white splotches, and others with bulging eyes.

Kino squatted on the floor, watching them, when a passing bellboy noticed.

"Aren't they cute? They're practically our mascots. Goldfish are all the rage in our country." He pointed at the fish with bulging eyes. "This one's especially rare. It's purebred, very expensive."

"I see. What other kinds of pets do you keep in this country? Dogs?" Kino asked.

The bellboy seemed taken aback. "Not at all. It's forbidden by law."

"Really?" Kino asked, rising.

"Yes. Think about those fierce, sharp teeth. They could easily hurt or kill someone. I can't imagine a world where people kept dogs as pets. Logically speaking, a pet should be completely harmless to people."

"What animals are legal, then?"

"Let's see..." the bellboy trailed off. "Goldfish, other small fish that are no more than 20 centimeters long when full-grown, plankton, and...some types of jellyfish. They're all very adorable."

"What else? Maybe like carp?"

"Too dangerous, I'm afraid. Carp need to be raised in ponds, and ponds are a drowning hazard."

"Cats?" Hermes wondered.

"Of course not. What if it scratched you and you contracted tetanus?"

"Small birds?" Kino asked.

"They were legal until three years ago. Then they found that the dust from their feathers could cause respiratory problems, so they were banned. All bird owners at the time had to turn in their pets to the government."

"Turtles?" asked Hermes.

"No animals with a bite force of more than 0.5 Pencil Hardness. Like snapping turtles, for instance."

"What does 0.5 Pencil Hardness mean?"

"That's how we measure bite force. 1 Pencil Hardness is enough force to break a pencil within one minute. In other words, animals that can break a pencil with their bite in less than thirty seconds are forbidden."

"That's harsh," Hermes said.

The bellboy proudly stuck up his head. "All for a safe, humane society."

The moment the bellboy turned to leave, Kino asked, "I have one more question. Why are all the shelves so close to the floor?"

"In case something falls off. In our country, shelves higher than the height of an average toddler are forbidden by law. That's also why our rooms are so large. This is what it means for a country to protect its people. ...By the way," the bellboy said, pointing at a low bookshelf in a corner of the lobby. It was filled from end to end with thick books, numbering at about fifty. "The latest edition of our law books, published just this year. You're free to borrow them as you please."

The next day, Kino rose at dawn.

As usual, she started off with warm-up exercises before heading down for breakfast. Then she smacked Hermes awake and left before the morning rush hour. The unmanned vehicle took them to the western gates.

At the window outside the walls was a young immigrations officer about twenty years of age. When he spotted Kino, he rolled in the safe containing her effects.

"This is yours, correct? Thank you for your cooperation."

Kino began by packing the rope and other implements. Then she put her many knives back in their places. The officer watched with rapt curiosity.

Then she took her dismantled persuaders and put them back in the blink of an eye. The officer looked on without fear.

Once Cannon and Woodsman were safely in their holsters, Kino jumped up and down lightly as if to check their weight.

"Much better. It feels like getting my hands and feet back," she said.

The officer, who had been watching in silence, finally said, "Traveler, may I ask for some of your time? I wanted to tell you something."

"What is it?" Kino asked, turning. The officer hesitated, but finally worked up his courage.

"I've never talked about this with anyone in our country before, but...I think there's something wrong with the way we think. How we ban anything that could possibly pose any harm at all. Maybe it's because I interact so much with travelers."

"What do you mean?" asked Kino.

The officer continued. "I...I mean, motorrads, knives, persuaders, cars, and even adhesives are all just tools. I thought that maybe...maybe they're only dangerous if we mishandle them. If we use them right, they could be just useful things for daily life. So..."

"Go on," Kino urged. The officer looked her in the eye.

"So I thought that maybe...humans are the most dangerous weapons of all. Human will, I mean. If an object happens to hurt someone, it's not because it had a will of its own and attacked someone. It's because a person used it to hurt another, or whoever was using it didn't have enough experience to wield it properly. There's no such thing as 'dangerous things' in our world. Only dangerous people. So I thought that maybe we could remove the ban on these things—just teach people how to use them right, and teach them the rules for handling them. Don't take away these things because they could be dangerous, but teach them that tools can be both useful and harmful, depending on how you use them. And make sure more and more people become aware of all that. Then maybe life will become more convenient. More fun, richer. I'm sure there will always be some risk, but it'll be worth it for all the new opportunities."

The officer looked around to see if anyone was listening. Then he lowered his voice.

"Traveler. You have a motorrad. Knives and persuaders too. And you use them all. So tell me. Am I wrong? I'm the only one who thinks this way in this entire country. Is something wrong with me? Please be honest with me; you're the only one who can answer my question."

The officer was at a genuine loss. Kino looked aside and fell into thought.

Finally, she broke her silence.

"Let me be honest with you. The answer is 'yes'. Something is wrong with you."

The officer's eyes widened. "Oh. Er, but..."

Kino continued. "I can see that your country has given serious thought to the issue of safety and made many wonderful rules to protect its people."

"What? But I..."

"And thanks to the rules, people live in peace and comfort. And they are happy. Do they seem sad and deprived to you?"

The officer was at a loss.

"I would love to live like you, if only it were possible. Your country is incredible. So I think something must be wrong with you to think that something is wrong with this country. It's a good thing you haven't told anyone else about it."

"R-really...?"

"Yes. So try and have a little more faith in your country's policies. Hold your head high."

The officer's shoulders drooped. "I see..."

"Please excuse us, then," Kino said, starting Hermes. The roar of his engine echoed against the wall.

"Thank you. ...Take care," said the officer.

"The same to you," Kino said, looking ahead. She put on her goggles and set off.

"...I see..." the officer muttered, watching the motorrad disappear into the distance.

"It's been a while since we let loose. Feels nice," Kino said.

Kino and Hermes raced down the lakeshore road. The forest flowed rapidly past to their right, and the sun was shining radiantly over the lake to their left.

"You can say that again. It's not right for a motorrad to get a ride. He's gotta run on his own wheels," Hermes agreed.

Kino did a drift as she turned. Pebbles went flying.

"Say, Kino?" said Hermes.

"Hm?"

"About what that officer said. Didn't Master say the same thing?"

A smile came over Kino's face. "Yeah. It was kind of nostalgic to hear that stuff."

"I knew it. So why'd you shoot him down?"

"For his safety," Kino replied. "If they get rid of dangerous things, they'll do the same for dangerous people."

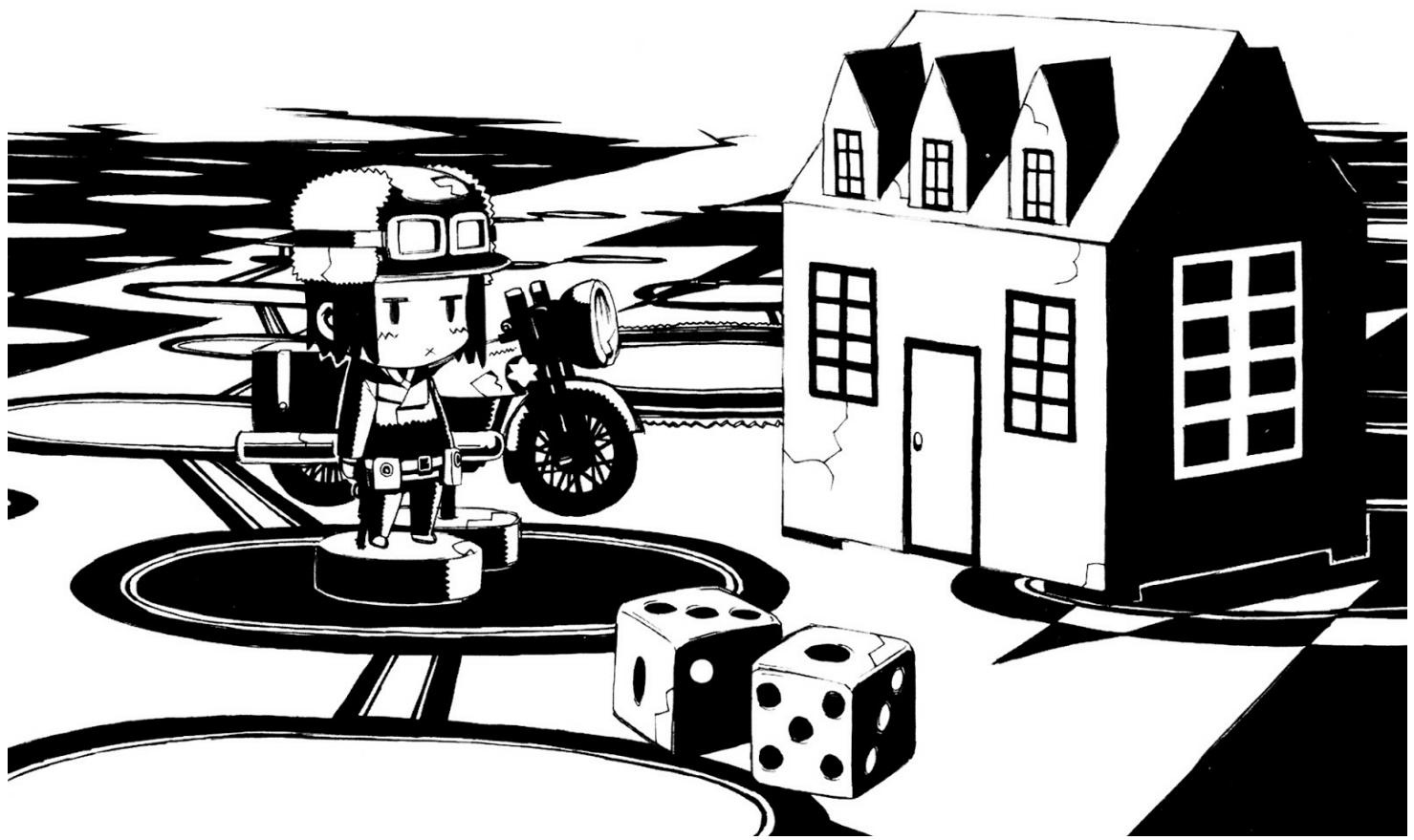
"Wow. I guess living safely with other people is hard work too."

"Yeah."

Kino pulled the brakes to slow down, avoiding a large rock in the middle of the path.

Then she accelerated again.





Chapter 7: During the Journey -

Intermission-

There was a deep, dark wood on a large, flat plain. Coniferous and deciduous trees made up the forest, which rippled in varying shades of green. Moss carpeted the ground where the sunlight did not reach.

A road cut through the forest, almost in a straight line. It was dirt-paved and bumpy, with dried-out remains of puddles gaping across the surface. Thick roots reached into the path as if to grab at the ankles of passersby.

It's so rugged, said the motorrad. Compartments hung from either side of its rear wheel, and a large suitcase, a rolled-up sleeping bag, and a coat were secured to the luggage rack atop it.

But this is supposed to be a shortcut, said the rider. She was in her mid-teens, wearing a black jacket, a hat, and a pair of goggles. She had a thick belt around her waist, and the jacket was open to let in the cool early-summer breeze. Underneath, she was wearing a white button-down shirt.

A holstered large-caliber hand persuader was strapped to her right thigh. A small automatic persuader was strapped behind her back.

The motorrad proceeded at a cautious pace, avoiding the occasional obstacle as it made its way through the woods. The gnarled roots reaching into the path were even more of a hindrance because the road was so straight.

There was a strong gust; the forest shook. Leaves fell off the branches, two landing on the motorrad's fuel tank and the rider's head. They were quickly carried off again.

The rider looked up at the sky between the branches overhead. Small grey clouds were pushed into the distance in clusters.

The wind's picked up, said the motorrad, It might start raining soon.

The rider replied, I don't feel like getting soaked. She spotted a large tree and said, We'll stop over there for now and pick up some firewood. They slowed

down.

Another gust of wind shook the woods. The motorrad said, shocked, Wait, Kino. There's a building nearby.

Kino pulled the brake. A building? You mean a house, Hermes? she asked.

If I had to say, it's more like a school or a town office, Hermes replied.

Kino looked around. All I see are trees, she said. Where is the building?

Hermes replied, A little ways into the woods, on the right side of the road. The ground's flat enough for riding all the way.

Kino made her way into the forest as she tried very hard to remain on the flat parts of the road.

The building was in the woods, hidden in the shadows of the trees.

It was long with two floors, built like a schoolhouse. Large, square stone foundations stood in perfect symmetry. At the center of the building was a wide doorway with a missing door, and a slight protrusion at the top that resembled a clock tower. Each side of the building contained two or three rooms.

The building was in terrible shape. The once-red roofs were now listing, the color almost scraped off. Rotting leaves covered it like sheets of brown and black. The dirty cream walls were covered in ivy, almost looking like hedges. The windows were all broken, reduced to empty black gaps.

A large tree stood next to the building, as though clinging to it and preventing it from escaping. The tree's roots were digging deep into the foundation.

Kino and Hermes stood in front of the building.

It's almost a ruin, Hermes said.

Kino disembarked and carefully propped up Hermes. What's inside? she asked.

A few lizards, and a lot of bugs, Hermes replied.

Buffeted by the wind, Kino stepped in through the doorway. A short while later, she stepped back out.

What's it like inside? asked Hermes.

Kino replied, The floor is tiled and still in good shape. The roof hasn't caved in anywhere, either. We might as well make use of this place.

Yeah, Hermes replied, We can avoid the rain here.

Much further into the forest from where Kino and Hermes were, gutted wooden buildings were lined up by the thousands. But they were hidden completely from sight.

Kino started Hermes and drove into the building. Hermes' headlight lit up the hallway, thick with dank air and the smell of dirt.

The hallway went in either direction. The roar of Hermes' engine echoed all throughout the building. Kino turned left. The walls were blackened with age, the wallpaper peeling. A small, shattered dresser cast macabre shadows against the wall.

Kino took Hermes to a room she had checked earlier. The room, which might have housed a class of schoolchildren once, was at the rightmost corner of the building and furnished with nothing. A slight breeze blew in from the frameless windows, lifting fallen leaves into the air.

Parking Hermes just inside the door, Kino turned off the engine. Complete silence came over the room.

With a clatter, she propped up Hermes by his center stand. And she said to the empty room, "Thank you for your hospitality."

Pale people were looking at Kino and Hermes.

They looked like faint blue lights, or perhaps pale mist. They were about the shapes and sizes of humans, but their faces only had eyes—no noses or mouths. Their eyes stared at Kino and Hermes.

About ten of them were in the room. Some were tall, and others were the size of children. They looked at Kino and Hermes as they stood in a circle around them.

Hermes mentioned that they should clean the room. Kino agreed. She rubbed the floor to see how dirty it was. When Kino moved to the center of the room, the pale people glided away as though scattering.

Let's sweep away the leaves, Kino said. Give me a minute, I'll go get some branches I can use as a broom.

Kino stepped out the door. The pale people all turned to her. Kino headed for the building's other exit, an empty doorway at the end of the hall. The pale people made way for her in unison. And they silently followed her.

Standing inside the doorway, they watched Kino as she went outside.

Kino broke off a branch with leaves on it and returned, holding the branch under her arm.

Let's get started, she said, sweeping the floor of her room with the branch. The pale people watched quietly and glided out of her way.

Kino gathered up the stray leaves and put the branch on top of the pile of keep them from scattering. Then she opened one of Hermes' compartments, taking out the waterproof canvas she used as a makeshift roof on rainy days. She opened it up on the floor, which was now a little cleaner than before. She made space for her things in a corner away from the window and put down her suitcase and sleeping bag. The pale people continued to watch.

There. Much better than camping out, Kino said.

You said it, Hermes agreed.

Now I just need to find some firewood.

Kino took a sack from one of Hermes' compartments and went out into the woods again.

When she returned, the pale people all turned to her. The sack was filled with dry branches and leaves. Kino took off her belt and black jacket.

You're just in time, Hermes said. Kino nodded.

At that moment, droplets of rain began falling from the overcast sky. The droplets soon turned to veritable streams. Some of the pale people looked out the window.

The rain went on softly, endlessly, soaking the forest and the building. Some of the droplets hit the remains of the windows and bounced into the room.

Kino piled up the dry leaves and some of the kindling she found, putting it all in the center of the room. On top of it all, she placed a larger branch. The pale people watched her hands at work.

She took a box of matches from a pouch on her belt and pulled out a waterproof match. Carefully, she lit it, waited for the small flame to grow, and tossed it into the pile. The leaves and kindling and the firewood began burning, in that order. The fire soon came to life.

The small campfire crackled in the middle of the room. What little smoke it had given off at the very beginning trailed off outside, leaving a faint white tail.

Kino took out two metal U-shaped frames from her things and put them together into a small scaffold to place over the fire. On top of the scaffold, she placed a worn metal mug filled with water.

She took a seat at the edge of the canvas, with her feet pointing at the campfire.

It's a little early, but I think I'll have dinner, she said, taking out some rations from her suitcase. The rations were wrapped in paper, and shaped like long rectangular pieces of clay. Kino did not unwrap them. Instead, she took out a can of food. It was large and flat, with the half-peeling label decorated with a picture of a cow.

Kino took out her utility knife and picked out the can opener. She cut the lid open and folded it upwards without removing it from the rest of the can. The pale people peered into the can from behind her. Inside was ground beef and a generous helping of garlic crumbs.

The water in the mug started to boil. Kino put on a thick glove and quickly switched out the cup for the can. She shifted the firewood slightly to make sure it wouldn't burn the canned food.

Then Kino went to Hermes and took out a square tin from one of the compartments. It was an airtight container divided into two, one side packed with tea bags and the other with sugar cubes.

With her left hand, Kino plucked out a tea bag and put it into the hot water. Color spread into the mug. Then she dropped a sugar cube inside.

Outside, the rain continued. It sounded almost like a piece of cloth being pulled taut. A thin mist obscured the details of the trees.

It's so nice to have a roof over our head, Hermes remarked. Kino agreed. And slowly, as the pale people watched, she took a sip.

When the beef started to boil, Kino adjusted the fire again. She took several more sips of tea before reaching for the can, smiling. With a gloved hand, she lifted it off the scaffold by the lid.

Kino took out a small folding spork from one of her pouches. She stuck the forked end into the can. The pale people watched her bring the ground beef into her mouth. Ow, hot, Kino hissed.

Why am I not surprised, Hermes groaned.

Inside the room were Hermes, the waterproof canvas, and Kino with her second cup of tea.

The campfire was burning out, and the empty can was lying next to it. It was still raining outside.

Inside the room were the pale people. Like shadows, or phantoms in the mist, they watched Kino and Hermes happily make plans for the next day.

The rain continued past sunset. Darkness was swallowing the woods.

Kino pulled out Cannon, the .44 caliber revolver she wore on her thigh. When the pale people saw the glinting weapon, they flinched with wide eyes.

Kino cocked the persuader. The pale people trembled. Each time she checked the persuader with a metallic noise, the pale people shook.

Still holding Cannon, Kino untied her sleeping bag. She opened the zipper and spread it over the canvas. The pale people standing there quietly made way.

Making her makeshift bed by the wall, Kino went to the small, dying fire. She scattered the burning branches to extinguish it completely.

The room soon went completely dark. The windows were all that remained, framing the grey world outside.

Kino went to her sleeping bag. She lay down, fixed her boots to the sleeping

bag, and rolled up the head cover to use as a pillow. Her right hand remained outside, holding Cannon.

Aren't you going to get cold there, Hermes asked. Kino replied from her sleeping bag that the rain would not let the temperature fall any more.

See you tomorrow, she said, closing her eyes and quickly falling asleep.

Even in the darkness, the pale people remained with their faint glow. They continued to watch Kino and Hermes.

That night, the rain stopped and the wind carried the rest of the clouds away.

A sparkling sea of stars emerged over the building, but no one was watching.

When day broke, the moist air regained its original tint.

Kino opened her eyes.

A pale, faint light was spilling in through the windows. Nothing had changed from the previous day.

As the pale people watched, Kino rose and stretched, still holding Cannon. She put on her belt and jacket.

When Kino went to the windows, the pale people made way for her. The forest was steeped in a silent morning mist, completely opaque past the fourth layer of trees. Birds were chirping.

Kino stepped out of the building. She did light exercises on the ground outside her room, and did marksmanship drills with Cannon. The pale people crowded the windows to watch.

She returned to her room and took a seat on the canvas.

It was bright now, both inside and out. As the pale people watched, Kino took Cannon apart, cleaned it, and put it back together. She did the same with her other persuader, which she called Woodsman.

Kino rebuilt the campfire and lit it. She brewed tea as she did the previous day, and this time ate her rations.

Then she started packing. She put away the scaffold, dismantled it, and gave her mug a wash. She wiped her face with a wet cloth and checked the edges of

her shirt.

Just as Kino rolled up her sleeping bag and tied it to her suitcase, the sun emerged. Beams of light drew long lines through the trees.

Kino smacked Hermes awake.

Good morning, he said.

Great weather today, Kino replied, to which Hermes answered, But the road's gonna be muddy.

Kino agreed, saying, I want to find a river soon and bathe and wash my clothes.

After loading her things, extinguishing the fire, and burying the empty can in a pile of leaves, Kino took one last look at the room with the pale people.

All set, she said, putting on her hat and goggles.

Kino climbed atop Hermes and stepped on the kick starter. The roar of the engine filled the room, escaping through the windows.

The pale people watched Kino and Hermes. She leaned forward to raise the center stand. When the motorrad moved forward, the pale people stepped back in unison.

With her left foot on the ground, Kino leaned to the side and pressed the gas lever. Hermes' rear wheel began to spin, turning him to the side. The motorrad drove down the hall lined with pale people and left through the main entrance. It emerged into the woods.

Kino looked back. Pale people packed every window and doorway, watching her and Hermes.

Let's get going, she said. Hermes agreed.

Kino took one last look at the building.

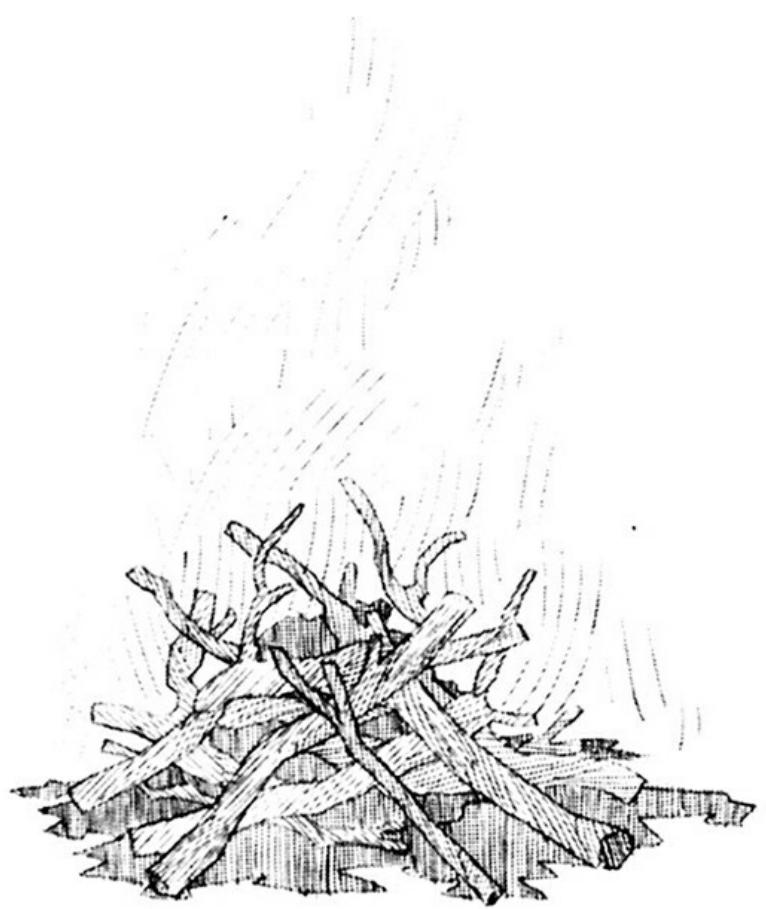
"Thank you," she whispered, and turned to go on her way.

The motorrad slowly made its way down the muddy road. The pale people watched, waving.

In the forest was a collapsing building surrounded by trees and grass and ivy.

The morning sun shone brightly upon it. Pale people stood at every window and doorway, watching Kino and Hermes leave as they waved.

They would continue to wave, on and on and on.





Chapter 8: A Blessing -How Much Do I Pay For?-

My name is Riku. I am a dog. I have long, soft, white fur. I may always look like I'm smiling, but I was just born with this look; it doesn't necessarily mean I am happy all the time.

My owner is Master Shizu.

We were riding the buggy across a snow-covered plain. As usual, Master Shizu wore a green sweater and a parka. Over his eyes he wore a pair of tinted goggles. I looked ahead from the seat beside him.

The snow that had accumulated over the winter was already melting. It was no longer so deep, and the buggy no longer hit snowdrifts along the way. But still, all around us was flat whiteness. The sky was covered in dense grey clouds. The morning sun did not show itself.

We had started on what passed for a road on the snowy plains. Unfortunately, the buggy's engine was in rather bad shape. Sometimes it slowed, and other times it spewed out black smoke or even nearly stopped.

Dismayed, Master Shizu operated the clutch and gear with extreme caution to make sure the engine would not come to a sudden stop. "I guess that's why proper maintenance is so important," he said, his breath puffing in the cold.

The buggy's front wheels plowed through the hardened snow, and the snow chains on the back tires dug into the soil underneath as we continued on north.

It was nearly noon when we caught sight of brown ramparts on the horizon. It was a large country that seemed to be floating over a sea of white.

The high walls of brown bricks encircled the country. Old-fashioned guard towers rose from the walls at regular intervals.

Master Shizu applied for entry at the equally old-fashioned gates. The guard asked him how long we were planning to stay.

Master Shizu answered that he would prefer to leave quickly, but that he did not know for certain how long our visit would be. "We will leave as soon as I get my buggy repaired. We have a schedule to keep, so I'd like to leave as soon as possible."

The guard suggested that we apply for a general ten-day visa instead of specifying a set number of days. Master Shizu followed the suggestion.

We rode the mud-covered buggy onto the country's roads.

It had been a long time since we had last come to such a prosperous and technologically advanced country. The streets were full of traffic. On either side of us were luxurious condos, with potted plants overlooking the streets from their balconies.

Ornate streetlights and trees lines the roads. Affluent people in tidy clothing stared as they made their way down the sidewalks.

The car repair shop that the guard directed us to was near the centre of the country, a fair distance from the residential quarter. We had the buggy checked as soon as we made it to the shop.

It was a simple repair job, but the mechanics had no idea how long it might take. They needed to replace a worn-out part of the engine. If a nearby warehouse had the part in stock, repairs would be finished by tomorrow morning. If it wasn't in stock, they would have to custom-order the new part, which would take two to three days. Master Shizu left the buggy in their hands and took down their contact information.

Master Shizu took his large black bag from the buggy and walked down the street. He soon stopped before a local hotel that the people at the repair shop had directed him to.

"I don't feel like staying in a place like this," he said, and turned away from the beautiful glass-covered building. He then looked around from the crossroads, searching for a cheaper place to stay.

Tall buildings were lined up in neat rows in the direction of the southern area. In the north, however, were smaller buildings huddled together in clusters. Master Shizu began to walk north.

We were soon greeted by a sight that could by no means be called clean. The road was narrow, and snow lined its edges. The houses were small and cramped, laundry hanging from their rooftops.

Master Shizu followed the chilly, deserted streets. Suddenly, someone came up from behind and stopped us, asking where we were headed.

The man who stopped us was a middle-aged, uniformed man, likely a police officer. He seemed surprised to see Master Shizu.

"A traveler, I see. You're best off keeping your nose out of here."

The officer explained that the country's northern quadrant was inhabited by its poorest citizens—it was practically a slum district. He added that the people there of the lowest caste of the nation's caste system.

"A class system, you say?" Master Shizu asked quietly.

"You're not one of those pesky activists, are you?" the officer asked.

"No."

"That's fine, then. We sometimes get those freaks around here. People who look down upon our caste system, I mean. They call it a cruel and unforgivable system, but our nation has its own history and rules. No one likes being told what to do by outlanders."

"I see. I'm not particularly concerned about this nation. I'm merely looking for a cheaper place to stay during my time here, as I'm not one for luxury myself."

"You're a strange one. Do as you like. But let me warn you: the ones ahead of us are all dirt-poor and filthy. Most are unemployed, and half of them live off thievery and by selling off blood and organs. Be aware that law enforcement is practically nonexistent."

"Blood and organs...? I suppose they'd fetch high prices."

"Who knows? It's illegal to remove them from living people, but the higher-ups are regulars, if you know what I mean. They don't really enforce the law."

"Then what about artificial organs?"

"Sure, they're an option, but not unless you're really desperate. There's

nothing like the real thing. That's probably why they're so expensive. People around here make money off 'em, and other people get a second chance at life with 'em. Watch your stomach around here, traveler."

Master Shizu thanked the officer, who gave him a bewildered look and disappeared.

The further north we went, the dirtier and more run-down the streets became. It was practically a different country than the nation's southern quadrant.

Master Shizu noticed a small alleyway that was relatively crowded. He walked in without hesitation.

Brown houses lined the messy, snow-covered streets. The sight of peeling plaster, broken bricks, and fallen buildings blended into an eerie atmosphere.

At intervals along the street were unwelcoming-looking shops with awnings before them. Women listlessly sat on their front porches, and men warmed their hands at a fire burning in a drum canister in the middle of the day. We stuck out like sore thumbs—children walking on dirty bare feet occasionally glanced in our direction.

Soon, Master Shizu was approached by a group of young men who obviously had no work, but a surplus of time and energy. They blocked our way and glared at Master Shizu, but the aftermath was just as I had expected.

Master Shizu did not even blink as he asked them for directions to an affordable hotel in the area. The men attacked him at once, and were knocked out with ease. In crime-infested areas like this, it was usually best to make a flashy show of strength in order to avoid trouble later.

Master Shizu asked the men for directions once again, and this time they personally led us to a nearby hotel. It was a small and messy establishment on the second floor of a restaurant, but the hotel was located in a relatively developed area of town.

The landlady led us to a tiny room containing nothing but a bed and a chair. The only source of heat was a small electric stove.

"Perfect," Master Shizu said to her.

Master Shizu returned to the room around evening. He told me that the owner of the repair shop was flabbergasted to hear that we were staying in a hotel like this.

Master Shizu took out his beloved sword from his bag. It was housed in a black scabbard. He slowly drew the blade. There wasn't a single blemish on its surface. Master Shizu then sheathed the sword.

"I realize I am not likely to convince you," I began, "But must you really go, Master Shizu?"

It was a question I had asked many times before.

Master Shizu's answer was also one I had heard many times before.

He recounted his reasons—reasons he had told me many times before.

And with a practiced conclusion, Master Shizu ended the conversation.

I sighed and lay down beside the bed, just as a small knock sounded at the door. I had felt a vague presence in the hallway outside of us for some time now.

Master Shizu got off the bed and walked up to the door. He slowly opened it.

Outside was a young girl.

She was perhaps about twelve years old. Her long black hair was tied into pigtails.

She was wearing a purple, multilayered dress that was native to this country. And just like with the other people in the area, it was very messy. Even her shoes were worn and riddled with holes.

"What is it?" Master Shizu asked, surprised. The girl simply looked up at him for several seconds. She was so short that she only went up to his chest. The girl then showed us the large basket she carried on her back.

"Hello, sir. I gather and sell scrap metal. Do you have any to spare?" she asked quietly.

Master Shizu shook his head. "But I have a loudmouthed dog here, if you want to take him."

"That's terrible, Master Shizu," I complained.

"I'm kidding." Master Shizu then turned to the girl at the door. "We just arrived in this country. I'm sorry, but we don't have anything for you."

"I see..." The girl apologized and bowed her head.

Master Shizu shut the door. The moment it closed, I caught sight of the girl raising her head again. She was looking in this direction, and I could tell that there was a strange glint in her eyes.

She had a look of fierce determination. It wasn't the kind of expression I expected to see on a dirt-faced girl living in dire poverty.

The next morning, Master Shizu and I were having breakfast on the second floor. He was tearing off pieces of bread. I put my share on the floor in front of me and waited for him to finish eating. The street outside was bustling today. The sun was shining warmly over the ground.

The girl from yesterday walked into the restaurant. I looked at her.

She approached Master Shizu just as he finished his bread and started on his pea soup.

"Good morning, Master Shizu!" she said brightly and clearly, standing with her back to the sun. It was a complete 180 from her attitude the day before.

Master Shizu stopped and looked at the girl.

"My name's Rafah!" she said, and made a shocking proposal.

"Master Shizu, please buy me!"

Understandably, Master Shizu was taken aback. "What?"

"Please buy me, Master Shizu! I'll be glad to work for you!" Rafah smiled.

Master Shizu looked at Rafah curiously. There wasn't a hint of hesitation in her eyes.

"I don't understand," said Master Shizu.

"I can explain! Master Shizu, you'll give me money, then I'll become your possession. I'll follow you on your travels outside the country. I'll do my best and work as your servant!"

"...I don't need a servant," Master Shizu said tersely, and returned to his breakfast.

Rafah pressed on, undeterred. "Please let me explain! I want to leave this country. Low-class people like me have to live in poverty for the rest of our lives. I can't go to school because I have to work and earn money. I'm sick of living like this. I want to get out of here, but I can't! People like us can't leave the country as we please. But if you buy me, Master Shizu, I'll become your possession, and I can leave the country with you!"

Master Shizu ignored her and focused on his meal.

"Please! Please buy me!"

"You won't regret it! I'm a hard worker!"

"I can cook for you! I'll do your laundry! I can sew really well!"

"And...it's a bit embarrassing, but since I'm a girl...if you want, Master Shizu, you can put your head in my lap and I can sing you lullabies!"

Master Shizu ignored all her offers and finished his breakfast.

He wiped his mouth and gestured at Rafah to stop following him around. He then asked the employee in the kitchen to borrow the phone, and made a call with the rickety machine on the wall.

I stopped mid-meal and looked up at Rafah. She crouched down in front of me.

"Hey, boy. What do you think I can say to make him buy me?"

I told her that I didn't know. If I did, things might have been much easier.

Master Shizu came back. Rafah stood up again and pointed to me.

"See? I just talked to your doggy here, and he smiled and agreed with me! Right, boy?"

Please don't put me on the spot like that.

"I was just born with this face. I'm not particularly in agreement at the moment."

"That doesn't matter! Please, take me with you. Please buy me!"

The people around us ignored the commotion Rafah was making in the restaurant and remained silent. Were they in agreement with her, or were they just unconcerned?

Master Shizu looked at me. "You can eat now, Riku. And as for the repair job..." He glanced at Rafah, then turned back to me with a look that was a mixture of 'I don't care' and 'I don't want to say this in front of her'. "They're going to take about two more days."

"So please! Buy me! Take me with you! Please!"

Rafah followed Master Shizu up the stairs, all the way to our door. Her high-pitched voice echoed through the hallway.

In the end, I had lost my mealtime. I took my food in my mouth and approached the room.

Master Shizu opened the door and looked back out towards me. "Riku."

"Yes, Master Shizu?"

"So your name's Riku, huh? It's nice to meet you, Riku, and you too, Master Shizu. So-"

"Take care of the rest."

"Master Shizu?"

Before I could ask any more, Master Shizu shut the door in my face and locked it from the inside.

"Tch." Rafah pouted from over my head. "Hey, Riku. How do you think I can get him to like me?"

I didn't know.

"Stop smiling and answer me!"

"I'm not smiling."

Rafah told me that she had to work all day, so she had no choice but to leave. She then told me that she would come back as many times as it took to convince Master Shizu to buy her, and departed.

"I don't care," Master Shizu said, once I entered the room and conveyed her

message to him.

Master Shizu spent the entire day in the cold room. He sat in the chair and stared at the same point on the wall for long periods of time, and sometimes he drew his sword and stared at the blade. He did nothing else—not even go down for lunch.

I silently stayed with him, sometimes sitting and sometimes lying down. The sun continued to move, changing the shadows it cast from outside the window.

By evening, the sun began disappearing into the northwestern sky, filling the room with orange light.

"I just have to make it there..." Master Shizu whispered, speaking for the first time in half a day.

I said, "Then we should make sure the buggy is in perfect condition. We can't have it break down all of a sudden before we arrive."

Master Shizu laughed—bitterly. "That won't be a problem. We can just wait for someone to attack us, and take their vehicle instead. It's all the same in the end. No one can complain."

"Master Shizu—"

"You can't stop me, Riku," he said gently.

"Good evening, Master Shizu! Have you decided to buy me now?"

Rafah came to see us again around dinnertime. The sun had already set; the streets outside were dark. In her basket was a meagre pile of scrap metal—the fruits of a hard day's work.

"Not yet," Master Shizu replied, not even looking at her.

"Then will you buy me tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"That's fine with me! You can buy me tomorrow, or even the day after!"

"Right."

"I don't care when you buy me!"

"Uh huh."

"But I don't have any time left today, so I'll come see you again tomorrow!"

"Bye."

"Good night, Master Shizu! You too, Riku!"

Rafah disappeared like the wind. Master Shizu continued to silently eat his dinner.

The next day was the third day of our stay.

As Rafah did not visit during breakfast, Master Shizu relaxed and took his time eating. He contacted the repair shop, and was told that the replacement part would be ready today; the repairs would be finished by tomorrow morning.

"So I guess we're leaving tomorrow morning."

I asked Master Shizu what we would do until then.

"Do we even have anything to do?" he replied.

Master Shizu returned to the room, and rested on his chair as he did yesterday. I could not tell whether he was dazed or deep in thought.

Soon, dark clouds covered the sky. It looked as though it would start snowing any moment. Master Shizu, however, remained seated on his chair like an elderly hermit, not even turning on the light.

He would have remained in that position all day if not for Rafah's visit around lunchtime.

"Hello, Master Shizu!"

There was a loud knock on the door, and the door opened before Master Shizu could even respond.

Rafah allowed herself in. Today, she was not carrying her uncomfortably large basket.

"I begged really hard to get the day off today!" she explained, without even being asked.

Master Shizu glanced at Rafah from the chair. He then began to ignore her.

"So now I can stay here all day! Please buy me, Master Shizu! Please! Get me out of this country!"

Rafah's demands continued. But Master Shizu remained lost in his own world, as if he had perfected a technique to ignore all that went on in the world around him.

For her part, Rafah went on talking tirelessly, making me wonder where all of her boundless energy came from. I looked upon them with astonishment and shock.

About an hour had passed.

"My parents have always been really poor. They couldn't afford to send me to school, so I can't find a good job. So I can only get poorer and poorer," Rafah said.

Master Shizu finally glanced in her direction.

"I want to ask you one thing," he finally said.

"Yes! What is it?"

"Do you have any family?"

Rafah's face suddenly lost its energy. "Yes," she answered, her tone dropping.

"What do they do?"

"My dad can't find any work, so he just lazes around all day. Mom's always really busy doing housework, and my younger siblings are all still too little to work. I'm the oldest of the seven of us."

"So you're the only one in your family who's earning any money?"

"Yes."

Master Shizu leaned on his chair for a moment, then stood. Rafah took a step back.

"Answer me honestly. If you were to disappear, your family would lose its only source of income. How will they survive?" Master Shizu asked clearly, meeting her eyes.

There was a moment of silence.

"Who cares? They'll find jobs somehow. They can work all day and not go to school, just like I'm doing now." Rafah replied brusquely.

"I see. In other words, you don't care what happens to your parents and siblings?" Master Shizu asked in a slightly sarcastic tone.

Rafah looked—no, glared—back. She nodded sharply. "Yes. As long as I'm happy, I don't care what happens to them. You have to make your own way in life, you know. I'm here right now because I want to reach for my dreams. That's why I'm asking you to buy me, Master Shizu. I'll never have another chance like this. so please...please buy me."

Rafah clasped her hands over her chest as if in prayer, and tightly shut her eyes.

"Stubborn kid," Master Shizu said. There was a smile on his lips. Who was he really talking about?

"How much?" Master Shizu asked.

"Huh?" Rafah opened her eyes, shocked.

"I said, how much do I pay for you?"

It took Rafah a rather long time to calm down. I did not know if the price she offered was cheap or expensive for human trafficking, but Master Shizu did not think on it and gave his answer.

"All right."

We were told that Rafah would legally become Master Shizu's possession if he paid the fee to the town hall nearby.

Rafah asked us when we were planning to leave. Master Shizu told her that we were due to depart tomorrow afternoon. We would spend the morning getting the buggy back, shopping for supplies, and buying Rafah.

Rafah agreed, and we promised to meet up at the town entrance tomorrow afternoon.

Rafah went over the promise over and over again. "You have to keep your promise, okay? If you don't, I..."

"All right. I'm a man of my word. But try not to bring too many belongings with you," Master Shizu said.

"Don't worry, Master Shizu!" Rafah chirped, "I'm not going to bring anything with me!"

It was evening. I watched as Master Shizu polished his sword in the small, lamp-lit room.

"I'm glad we have a new traveling companion," I said.

Master Shizu looked up at me. "Riku. I'm going to abandon that girl as soon as we get out of this country. I don't care what happens to her afterwards."

"She'd die quickly. She's not a dog, Master Shizu."

"Then we'll abandon her at the next country we reach. She'll be able to make a living somehow, even if it's housekeeping work. As long as she works hard and luck is on her side, she'll be able to make a good life for herself."

"But Master Shizu, the next country is..." I said tentatively. Master Shizu's eyes widened.

"I'd forgotten... What am I doing...?" He shook his head, astonished.

"How about we take a short detour to drop her off someplace, Master Shizu? It would delay our plans, but..." I suggested tentatively, knowing that it would fall on deaf ears.

"I can't do that. ...When the time comes...I'll leave it to you, Riku."

"Master Shizu..."

"Good night."

The next morning, the sky was cloudy. Master Shizu and I headed for the repair shop to pick up the buggy. They gave us the fixed buggy and the worn-out engine part.

We then bought food and supplies in the southern district, a world apart from the northern area where we had stayed. Master Shizu silently picked up more supplies than usual.

We reached the village entrance. Rafah was not alone. She was accompanied

by what looked to be her family—a young mother and father, and six younger siblings.

Rafah gave us a happy wave. But her parents and siblings were quietly crying. They asked nothing of us, nor did they blame us. They simply watched as she left their presence.

"Goodbye," Rafah said, and took my passenger seat. She was wearing her usual purple dress. But otherwise, she really had come with nothing. I surrendered the passenger seat and retreated to the luggage hold in the back.

"Is this really all right?" Master Shizu asked.

"Yes. Let's go. The town hall's first," she replied.

Master Shizu turned away from her weeping family and started the buggy.

We went through immigration procedures at the gates. The guard was shocked to see Rafah.

"Traveler? Why is a dirty lowe-class girl—"

"I have my reasons," Master Shizu answered. Rafah showed the guard her own receipt in turn. "That's right. I'm Master Shizu's possession now. Is there a problem?"

"No, but..." The guard shook his head.

We had just stopped by town hall to buy Rafah. The employee looked shocked by the amount of money Master Shizu paid.

"This is my address. Please make sure to tell my family that I've been sold. Please," Rafah had said. The man at the desk did not say anything else.

The gates slowly opened.

The heavy doors gave way to the sight of a snow-covered horizon.

"Wow..."

Rafah stood up from her seat, captivated by the wondrous sight. She then stopped in place as though frozen.

Outside the country's walls were a snow-covered plain. Winter was almost at an end. The snow would soon melt, and grass would cover the lands in verdant

green.

We drove out the gates. Master Shizu expertly put the snow chains on the tires, as Rafah looked out at the white fields under the grey skies. The gates closed behind us.

"Aren't you cold, dressed like that?" Master Shizu asked, putting on his parka.

Rafah replied that she was used to the cold, adding, "Let's hurry! We have to get out into that plain, where we can't see the castle walls! Quickly!"

"All right."

Master Shizu started the buggy. The engine ran smoothly, no longer spouting black smoke.

The buggy drove onward.

It was not long afterwards.

The buggy had not been going for long. We had gone far enough for Rafah's homeland to have disappeared out of sight beyond the horizon.

"Please, stop," Rafah said suddenly.

"Huh?" Master Shizu looked to his right. Rafah looked to her left.

"Please, stop the buggy."

He did as she asked. We were in the middle of the snow fields, in the centre of the horizon that encircled us.

"What is it?"

Rafah did not answer; she simply stepped off the buggy. She quietly walked upon the snow field, leaving her footprints behind her.

She then stopped. She stood on the field with her back to us. If a bird were to pass by overhead, it would only see a buggy and a young girl standing a short distance away.

"How long are you going to stand there? We're going to leave you behind," Master Shizu said, putting on his goggles. But he didn't sound at all angry.

Rafah turned to face us. Her pigtails shook.

She then smiled.

"Yes. That's what you're going to do."

Master Shizu, confused, said something he had said to her before. "I don't understand."

"I'm going to die soon," Rafah replied.

Master Shizu cut the engine. The sound of the buggy soon disappeared from the windless plain.

"It's because I'm going to die soon," Rafah repeated.

Master Shizu stepped off the buggy and approached Rafah. She explained everything. I listened from the buggy.

"I sold my organs at the hospital this morning. I'm being supported by some weird machines inside my body right now. And they told me that the machines and the painkillers won't last more than half a day."

"Why would you do that?"

"I needed the money. The money I earned from my organs, and the fee you paid to purchase me—it was much higher than the regular market value. And my family's going to get it all."

"Then what happens?"

"That's a huge amount of money. It's enough to feed my family for the next few years. My siblings can all go to school now. They won't have to work like I did. They can graduate from school and find better jobs. And they'll have much better lives."

Master Shizu was silent.

"And I got to see the world outside for the first and last time. I've always wondered what it was like out here."

Rafah again looked towards the distant horizon. Master Shizu stood beside her and looked in the same direction. They stood side-by-side, their backs turned towards me. The tall Master Shizu, and Rafah, who didn't even reach his shoulders.

"In other words," Master Shizu said, "you tricked me. You made me waste my money on this."

"Yes. I'm sorry," Rafah replied, eyes refusing to waver.

"You're not, are you?"

"Nope. Not at all."

I heard a small, bitter chuckle. It must have been Master Shizu.

"Besides..."

"Besides?"

"You're going to die soon, too, Master Shizu. Right?"

They continued talking, standing side-by-side on the snow-covered plains. I watched them from atop the hood of the buggy.

"That's what you said, right? I heard everything."

"You mean, when I was arguing with Riku on my first night here? I guess I did."

I'd heard it too.

"I heard you say, 'There's something I have to do, even if I have to die for it'. That's when I realized that a way like that even existed. I knew that even I had that option. So I decided to go through with it. That's why I decided to trick you."

"I see..."

"This was what I was meant to do. Master Shizu. You gave me this first and final chance—the one chance for me to create my own destiny."

Rafah then looked up at Master Shizu and smiled.

"And it worked."

"All's well that ends well," said Master Shizu.

"What does that mean?"

"It's a saying in my hometown. It means that your methods or reasons don't matter, as long as things work out in the end. The last thing you ever

accomplish decides the worth of your life—it might be slightly different, but it sounds about right."

"Now that I think about it, I think it would be really fun to live and travel with you, Master Shizu. But you're going to accomplish your goal and die in the next country, right? So that's not possible. It's not an option, for either of us."

"That's right. It's impossible."

"Then I think it's best to say goodbye here."

"Yes."

"Um, there's one last thing... My stomach's started hurting a little. It's kind of stupid to say this now, but I'm really scared of pain. So Master Shizu?"

"Yes... I understand."

Rafah nodded slightly, satisfied.

She then looked out into the snow-covered fields.

It was a bleak landscape of endless white.

"The outside world is so beautiful, Master Shizu."

"Yes. Maybe you're right."

"I wonder...are there places even more wonderful than this?"

"I'm not sure."

Rafah nodded. "Me neither."

She then turned to Master Shizu. Master Shizu turned to her.

Rafah softly reached out to Master Shizu's cheeks.

"I'll pray that you accomplish your goal, Master Shizu."

"I'll make sure I do. I'm ready to do what I have to do. Even if the gods don't offer any help," Master Shizu replied.

"Could you crouch down a bit?" Rafah asked. Master Shizu knelt on the ground. Rafah closed her eyes and softly kissed him on the forehead.

"It's a blessing," she said, embarrassed. She then spoke her final words.

"I'll be waiting."

"All right." Master Shizu nodded.

Master Shizu knew ways to inflict unimaginable pain upon a man before killing him.

He also knew ways to do just the opposite.

Master Shizu placed Rafah's body upon the snow, knelt beside it, and closed his eyes.

I jumped off the buggy and went to his side.

Master Shizu opened his eyes and looked at me. He then looked at Rafah, who slept before us.

"What a wonderful smile. I hope I can die like this too."

Master Shizu wore a peaceful smile—one that I had never seen before. It was wonderful, just like the one Rafah had departed with.

The sound of a shovel digging into the muddy ground resounded across the windless plain.

It soon turned into the sound of the ground being covered again.

Master Shizu returned to the buggy, carrying a dirt-covered shovel. I had never seen him cry until now, and I still did not see him do so.

He fastened the shovel back in the luggage hold and took the driver's seat. He then turned to me, standing on the snow beside him.

"Looks like she managed to do this before I could. And there's no way I can't do what she has. I'd be a fool if I couldn't. Let's get going, Riku," Master Shizu said cheerfully, putting on his goggles.

"Let me ask you again, Master Shizu. Perhaps you could reconsider?"

"There's no time. We'll just make it if we leave now. The buggy's in good shape, too."

Master Shizu started the engine.

I looked up at Master Shizu. He looked ahead.

"What are you going to do, Riku? Are you going to say goodbye to me, too?"

"No, Master Shizu. I will follow you to the end."

"Then come on up."

I jumped onto the hood and took my place in the passenger seat. And I looked ahead, as I always did.

Master Shizu reached out with his right hand and gave me a pat on the head.

We rode the buggy across the snow-covered plain, the clear sound of the engine echoing across the fields.

The buggy's front wheels plowed through the hardened snow, and the snow chains on the back tires dug into the soil underneath as we continued on north.

To Master Shizu's hometown, the land of carnage.

—Road to "Colosseum"



—Road to "Colosseum"

Epilogue: A Vow • A -A Kitchen Knife• A-

Day XX of Month XX of the Year XX.

Weather: Clear.

Today is the most unforgettable day of my life.

The most wonderful, most beautiful day. What could possibly be better than this?

I am infinitely grateful for the chance to record my thoughts like this now, as the day comes to a close. This journal is mostly about trivial things, so I don't know if I can express everything I feel properly today.

But I know that in twelve years, I'll remember this day clearly. No, in fact, reading this entry will be enough to let me relive this joy. I am writing to remind myself of the most marvelous day of my life.

How do I describe this happiness?

My daughter was born today.

It was around evening when I got the news and headed to the hospital.

The first I saw of her, she was sleeping soundly in her little basket. So small and delicate, but that was all I could make out before my eyes went blurry with tears.

My wife was lying in the bed next to her, smiling when she spotted me cry. She was exhausted from the labor, the hardest work in the world, but her smile was radiant. I desperately tried to swallow my tears as I gave her a kiss. How could I repay her for this incredible work? Or our daughter, for that matter?

Today, I received the greatest treasure of all. The most beautiful blessing in the world, sharing my wife's blood and mine. A blessing I wouldn't exchange for anything.

I swear here and now that I will devote all I am to this baby—everything I can muster, until the end of my days.

Her happiness will be me and my wife's happiness. We will always be on her

side. Even if it means turning the world against us, even if it means sacrificing everything we have, we will stand on her side to the end.

She'll become just as beautiful as her mother, I'm sure. And just the thought of watching her grow, day after day, is indescribably moving. I am the happiest man in the world.

Someday, our daughter will be old enough to help us with our work. I wonder if I'll cry when she gets married? Damn it, I finally understand why my father-in-law was wailing at the wedding. I feel sorry that I ever thought he was an overly sentimental old man. (I should apologize to him when we go to show him his first granddaughter.)

Every day will be wonderful. Two have become three, and we will live out our days in happiness. Today, all our misery turned to joy. And I know that everything will be all right in the future.

I have tomorrow off, so I'll head to the hospital to have a good look at our baby daughter (not that I couldn't later, of course.)

We'll discuss the baby's name then. We'd thought of a few boy's and girl's names, but none of them stood out to us.

But on the way back from the hospital today, I was struck by inspiration. I happened to overhear a conversation by people who seemed to be immigration officers.

They were talking about the red flowers that come into full bloom outside the walls at this time of year. They say they're a vivid red and stretch on to the edges of the horizon. But the flowers only bloom for a short time, they say.

My wife and I have never seen the flowers, and we never will. Nor will our daughter.

But I think we will name her after that flower. I'm sure my wife will like it.

Each year, on our daughter's birthday, the flowers will cover the world outside, almost like a blessing.

The name of the flower, they said, was—